THE DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ENGLAND, THE NETHERLANDS, SPAIN AND SWITZERLAND.

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Abstract

This research studies the development of policies for quality assurance in four European systems of higher education, namely England, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland. It compares how these four countries have adopted the policies for quality assurance that can be observed currently and investigates the extent to which cross-national convergence may be taking place.

The theoretical approach to the topic is based on policy analysis. Quality assurance is approached as a policy domain within which particular public policies are formulated and implemented. These policies correspond to the responses of the different countries to a number of fundamental choices regarding the organisation of the quality assurance policy domain and are composed of ideational (the policy beliefs) and material (the policy instruments) elements. The type of response is influenced, it is argued, by a number of factors. These can be either internal or external to the system of higher education and can originate either from within the national environment or internationally.

The comparative method upon which the empirical studies are based makes a distinction between diachronic and synchronic comparisons. First, the analysis focuses on the factors that can influence the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue in each national context. Then, the focus shifts to the factors potentially at play in the construction of the quality assurance policy domain. This distinction permits the assessment of the emergence of quality assurance as a problem and the kind of policies each country has developed to address the fundamental choices in quality assurance in HE.

The data consist of documentary sources of different type as well as twenty-three interviews with actors involved in the process of policy formulation in HE in general and quality assurance in particular in the four countries.

The comparative analysis of the national quality assurance policy domains reveals that cross-national convergence has been (and still is) taking place. This convergence, however, takes place at the level of the policy beliefs, the paradigm core of the national policies, whereas the policy instruments formulated in each country tend to reflect, to a substantial degree, the impact of national factors.

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List of Abbreviations

All Swiss abbreviations refer to the French version of the name. The English translations, as well as all translated text throughout the study, are from the author.

AAU	Academic Audit Unit
AQ	*Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari a Catalunya* – Agency for Quality Assurance in the Catalan University System
BoE	Boletin oficial del Estado – State Bulletin (Spain)
CCAAs	*Comunidades Autonomas* – Autonomous Communities
CDA	*Christen-Democratisch Akkoord* – Christian Democratic Party
CEC	Council of European Communities
CNAA	Council for National Academic Awards
COSHEP	Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals
CNE	*Comité National d'Evaluation* – National Committee for Evaluation
CRE	Association of European Universities
CRUS	*Conférence des Recteurs des Universités Suisses* - Conference of Swiss Universities' Rectors
CSS/T	*Conseil Suisse de la Science (et de la Technologie)* – Swiss Science (and Technology) Council
CUS	*Conférence Universitaire Suisse* - Swiss University Conference
CU	*Consejo de Universidades* – Council of Universities
CVCP	Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals
DES	Department of Education and Science
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
EC	European Commission
ENQA	European Network of Quality Assurance
ERA	Education Reform Act
EUA	European University Association
EUREC	Confederation of European Union Rector's Conferences
F&HE Act	Further and Higher Education Act
FNRS	*Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique* - National Research Foundation
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GSR	*Groupement pour la Science et la Recherche* - Swiss Science Agency

HBO	*Hoger Beroepsonderwijs* - Higher Vocational Education
HBO-Raad	*Hoger Beroepsonderwijs Raad* – Council of Higher Vocational Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Council
HES	*Hautes Ecoles Spécialisées* - Universities of Applied Sciences
HOAK	*Hoger Onderwijs: Autonomie and Kwaliteit* - Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality
HOOP	*Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek Plan* - Higher Education and Research Plan
LEA	Local Education Authority
LAU	*Loi fédérale sur l'Aide of aux Universités (et la Coopération dans le Domaine des Hautes Ecoles)*- Federal Act on Financial Assistance to Universities (and Co-operation in Higher Education)
LOGSE	*Ley de Ordenación General del Sistema Universitario* – Act on the General Regulation of the Educational System
LRU	*Ley de Reforma Universitaria* – University Reform Act
MEC	*Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia* – Ministry of Education and Science
MESSC	Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture
MOCW	*Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen* - Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
MP	Member of Parliament
NAB	National Advisory Body (for Local Authority Higher Education)
NIHEC	Northern Ireland Higher Education Council
NPM	New Public Management
OAAQ	*Organe d'Accréditation et d'Assurance Qualité* – Organ for Accreditation and Quality Assurance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFES	*Office Fédéral pour l'Education et la Science* - Federal Office for Education and Science
PCFC	Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council
PI(s)	Performance Indicator(s)
PM	Prime Minister
PNECU	*Plan Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad de las Universidades* – National Evaluation Plan for the Quality of Universities
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
QAD	Quality Assessment Division
QUANGO	Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisation
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise

SCOP	Standing Conference of Principals
SKG	*Selectieve Krimp and Groei* - Selective Concentration and Expansion
TVC	*Taakverdeling en Concentratie* - Task Reallocation and Concentration Policy
UFC	Universities Funding Council
UGC	University Grants Committee
UK	United Kingdom
UUK	Universities UK
USA	United States of America
VSNU	*Vereniging van Samenwerkende Nederlandse Universiteiten* - Association of Universities in the Netherlands
VVD	Liberal Party

Introduction

Context and Aims of the Research

The last three decades or so have been a period of profound transformation for higher education (HE) in Europe and beyond. Such transformation has stemmed from the combination of several trends of which massification has been the most important (Altbach 1999; Trow 1973; Teichler 1997). As they grew up, both quantitatively and qualitatively, national systems of HE have been forced to adapt to new realities. The types of relationships traditionally held with the political authorities have evolved, as have the amounts and sources of financial support. During the 1980s, these trends came together in several countries to make quality assurance a political issue. Most Western countries have been affected, although differences prevailed as regards to the moment when the trends emerged and the form they adopted. In the European context, these trends have been complemented by increasing concerns for greater harmonisation of the policies formulated to tackle them.

Against this background, this study aims to analyse how four European countries - England[1], the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland - have set up systematised policies for quality assurance in HE. The main objective is to investigate whether and to what extent the policies formulated are converging. To that end, the issue of policy convergence in quality assurance is discussed both in an analytic and a narrative way. On the one hand, the study provides a theoretical construct where quality assurance is approached as a policy domain within which particular policies are formulated and implemented. On the other hand, such a theoretical construct is used to highlight cross-national differences and/or similarities in the domains of the quality assurance policy of the four countries. The observed differences and/or similarities are then explored in relation to the configuration of several factors within each country.

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[1] This research describes and analyses the higher educational system of the political entity generally known as "the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" (Birch 1998: 3). The empirical data relate to only one of the components of this political entity, England, although the implications of the sources from which the data are derived go beyond the geographical English boundaries.

Necessary Choices and Personal Standpoints

This study is the product of a project carried out by a single researcher over a period of three years. The limited amount of time and resources obliged the author to make important choices. Although difficult and frustrating, they were indispensable if the research was to be maintained within a scope that would be intellectually challenging and practically workable. Two of the choices are worth some consideration.

First, although the study addresses the issue of quality assurance, quality assurance *per se* is not its primary focus. The study acknowledges the iterative nature of such a notion (Barnett 1992; Brennan and Shah 2000; Brennan *et al.* 1992; Green *Ed.* 1994; Kells 1999) and endorses an anti-essentialist and contextual approach to it, arguing that there cannot be a single and definite definition of quality assurance in HE. Rather, its relevance can best be apprehended in relation to the meaning(s) given to it in a particular national setting. Admittedly, quality assurance does not exhaust the number of issues debated in HE. It does, however, constitute a central element in the discussions surrounding the formulation of HE policies. So much so that it is hardly possible to name a country that has not addressed it in one way or another in recent years. The second choice concerns the extent of the empirical work. A comprehensive examination of all the factors influencing the construction of the quality assurance policy domain is beyond the scope of the study. Therefore, emphasis is placed on the national dimension and, within this, on a limited number of factors. The international level cannot be fully accounted for without unbalancing the entire study, although it cannot remain totally ignored either. A balance has been found by concentrating on three factors: the European Union, the professional associations and the process of internationalisation in HE.

The study adopts a comparative design whose structure reflects both epistemological and methodological standpoints. As regards the former, it is argued that the quality assurance policy domain, as currently observable, is not a *given*, i.e. something that can be taken for granted, but a construction. The observable reality is always a moment of something, the momentary outcome of a broader and ongoing process. Therefore, distinguishing between moment and process constitutes an indispensable intellectual and epistemological posture if one's intention is to assess not only what is, but also the reason why it has become so and how it can evolve. This distinction is analytically pertinent and heuristically useful. It permits

the de-naturalisation of social reality by arguing that the observable situation is the outcome of the particular configuration of national and international factors that are internal and external to the HE systems. Moreover, the distinction offers a valuable basis to compare policy domains and, because it informs on the process that has led to the existing situation, makes it possible to highlight elements that can prevent or promote cross-national policy convergence.

The methodological standpoint of the study stems from its epistemology. It advocates the use of a case-study research design based on the distinction between synchronic and diachronic dimensions. Once integrated in a single framework, these dimensions allow for a narrative of the social history of national quality assurance policy that highlights how it has adopted its current form. Within this epistemological and methodological framework, the main objective of the study is addressed through the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data.

Structure of the Study

The study adopts the following structure. Chapter 1 discusses the commonality of the trends national HE systems are confronted with. The discussion goes from the general to the particular so that the peculiarities of the countries selected are highlighted. Chapter 1 concludes with an outline of the research problem and research questions addressed in the study.

Chapter 2 explores the theoretical framework used in the study. Because quality assurance is approached as a policy, the chapter first conceptualises the notion of policy in a way that takes into account the concerns for cross-national convergence. This latter point is discussed further in the second part of the chapter, where a conceptualisation of the process of policy convergence is provided.

In chapter 3, the theoretical framework is developed further and related to quality assurance more specifically. This leads to the construction of a model for the comparative study of quality assurance policy. To that end, five fundamental choices are identified for the domain of quality assurance and potential responses are outlined. These responses are displayed as pairs of oppositions, thus offering a frame for systematic cross-national comparison. On this basis, the quality assurance policy is modelled further by outlining the factors at play in its

emergence as a political issue, and those at play in the translation of these debates into a set of systematised policies.

Chapter 4 deals with methodological issues. It begins with a discussion of the paradigm within which the whole research is embedded before turning to the presentation of the country reports. The selection of the four countries is highlighted together with the methods of data collection and issues of validity and ethics. Because of the comparative nature of the study, the methodological chapter also provides a particular insight into the uses of the comparative method for analysing policy convergence/divergence in quality assurance.

The empirical analysis comprises chapter 5 to chapter 8. The four case studies adopt a similar structure. They begin with a description of the political characteristics of the country under scrutiny as well as those of their respective HE systems. Then, the issue of quality assurance is first addressed from what is currently observable. This synchronic view is complemented with a diachronic account of the process through which the current quality assurance policy domains in each country have become what they are. For that purpose, emphasis is placed on the different factors at play and their influence on policy outcomes.

Chapter 9 discusses the empirical findings. It looks back at the research problem in order to assess whether policy convergence has taken place and, if so, to what extent. Cross-national differences and/or similarities are pointed out in terms of responses to the fundamental policy choices and attempts are made to understand the observed differences and/or similarities on the basis of the configuration of the factors.

Chapter 10 concludes the study with a discussion of ways to improve the overall research design and proposals for further studies.

Chapter 1 Framing the Study

1.1. Introduction

The present chapter sketches out the framework of the study. It pursues two objectives: to describe the policy context of HE within which quality assurance is embedded and to outline the research problem and research questions addressed in the study.

Section 1.2 discusses the most significant trends that have affected HE policy in Europe and beyond: expansion, funding, the changing role of the state and accountability. In the European context, these trends have been accompanied by increasing demands for harmonisation in the responses provided. Section 1.3 highlights the origins of these demands and relates them to early experiences in quality assurance. It also narrows down the scope of the study to four countries - England, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland - and one policy domain – quality assurance. The research problem and the research questions are derived from this general background and presented in section 1.4.

1.2. Policy Change in Higher Education

It is common knowledge that HE systems in Europe and beyond have been under the influence of far-reaching trends over the last three decades or so. A glance at recent literature offers an insight into the nature of these trends, their implications, and the way different countries have addressed them (Altbach 1999; Altbach and Todd 1999; Clark 1998; Currie and Newson *Eds* 1998; Green *Ed.* 1997; Kogan and Hanney 2000; Mora and Vidal 1999; Neave 1995; Neave and van Vught *Eds* 1991; Magrath 2000; Sporn 1999a, b; Williams 1997). Although differences can be found in the way these trends are approached, all the authors agree in emphasising that they are common to all HE systems.

1.2.1. Expansion

Among the trends addressed in the literature, the shift from elite to mass HE is often considered as the catalyst of most changes experienced during the last three decades or so (Scott P. 1995a). Debates about the expansion of HE emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Teichler 1988: 19-20). Governments of the time were questioning the traditional elite system of HE that prevailed and embarked on a process of expansion to wider groups of the

population. This decision was not solely based on humanistic reasons but also encompassed recognition of education and HE as key factors in economic development. In the early 1970s, Trow systematised the process of expansion by categorising national systems according to the proportion of the age-group enrolled in HE: elitist (below 15%), mass (between 20 and 30%) and universal (above 30%) systems of HE (Trow 1973). According to Trow, most countries were experiencing a shift towards the universal pole. Table 1.1 provides an overview of the expansion in a number of selected countries.

TABLE 1.1. GROWTH OF HIGHER EDUCATION 1985-1995 (1985 = 100)

Source: personal elaboration from NCES 2000: 51; for Japan: MESSC (1997: 30).

The commonality of the process, however, should not hide the cross-national differences in the timing and shape of expansion. The United States was among the first countries to open up access to HE. In this case, expansion was preceded by a diversification of the system itself, thus allowing for new types of students to study further. Western European countries, in contrast, took longer to depart from the elitist pole. In some cases, this happened only recently and the way it was carried out was often resisted by the academia (Darvas 1999: 82). The expansion of HE was not simply quantitative, i.e. letting *more* students in, but also qualitative, i.e. letting *different* students in. The fact that different types of students were reclaiming access to HE made the traditional structures obsolete. New HE institutions were set up in a process known as diversification (Hannan and Freeman 1977; Gellert 1993, 1995; OECD 1991). One should, however, remain cautious when it comes to drawing general conclusions about the expansion of HE. There are factors that can reduce, if not reverse, the trends (Altbach 1999: 108). This can be the case, for instance, in countries where a significantly high participation rate has already been achieved and where there is more

limited room for further expansion (for instance in Japan). In other cases, demographic changes can challenge expansion (for instance in Spain).

Despite differences in the timing and rhythm, expansion has become a reality in most countries. As a result, questions of governance and quality have been raised: can a massified system be governed in the same way as an elite one? How does the access of non-traditional students affect the overall quality of the system? The responses to these questions have led to profound transformations of national HE systems.

1.2 2. Funding

When the decision to expand HE was made, it was endorsed by a strong governmental commitment in meeting the costs. This commitment was first questioned during the second half of the 1970s (Goedegebuure and Meek 1997: 310). Debates concentrated on limiting the number of new entrants and reducing the financial participation of the state in HE and other sectors. This latter trend became most visible from the early 1980s onwards. It coincided with the end of the consensus that emerged from World War II regarding the role of the state towards social services and with the victory of neo-liberal economic theories.

The progressive disengagement of the governments was accompanied by changes in the way the beneficiaries of HE were perceived (Altbach 1999: 110). From a perspective dominated by HE as a "public good", a shift has taken place towards greater emphasis on the individual benefits of HE. The shift has not affected the general perception of the value of HE as a key element of economic and social prosperity, which remains a key dimension of political rhetoric in HE policy. What has changed is the involvement of those who attend HE. Perceived as a private good, HE has to be paid for by those who directly benefit from it. In most cases, this means students having to pay – higher – fees.

Finally, changes in patterns of funding have also been associated with an increasing concern for efficiency (Finister *et al.* Eds 1991). In this regard, governments have emphasised the necessity for HE institutions to compensate for the reduction of funds with a more efficient use of resources. In many cases this has led to organisational changes within the institutions (Jarratt 1985) and has accelerated the emergence of the debate on quality assurance (Neave 1988).

1.2.3. Role of the State

Linked with the issue of funding, another characteristic of the transformations of HE in recent years has been the redefinition of the role of the state in the organisation of HE systems. These debates are related to the shift from an interventionist form of government activity, mainly based on the Keynesian paradigm, to a less intrusive one described by some as "steering not rowing"[2] (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). Following similar trends in other public sectors, changes in the type of relationships between the HE institutions and the political authorities echoed the emergence of the "*evaluative state*" (Neave 1988, 1998) as a means of limiting the commitment of the state in HE and replacing it by the market.

As a result, the type of control exercised by the state over HE institutions was modified (Neave 1984), leading to new forms of institutional autonomy. Neave and van Vught (1991: 251-253) argue that one of the most salient characteristics of the changing role of the state on institutional autonomy was the shift from "process control" to "product control". For them, the withdrawal from close and detailed regulations reflects a reduction in process control. Governments and administrations in several countries disengaged themselves from the day-to-day activities of HE institutions to concentrate on a tighter control of what came out of these institutions, such as the level and standards of qualifications or the amount of academic work produced. Most changes related to the rise of the evaluative state developed on models derived from New Public Management (NPM). These induced a shift from direct and *ex-ante* control mechanisms to indirect and *ex post* ones based on output controls (Kickert 1995; Braun 1999).

1.2.4. Accountability

The shifting role of the state from interventionist to supervisory attitudes impacted on the room for manoeuvre of HE institutions and was accompanied by increasing concerns about accountability. Like other generic notions, accountability is multifaceted and can be looked at from different angles. In general terms, it can be seen as a "requirement to demonstrate responsible actions to one or more external constituencies" (van Vught 1994: 355).

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[2] To a large extent, this shift is consistent with more general transformations of the role of the state in modern societies. Largely generated by the influence of supra-national organisations such as the OECD, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the traditional model inherited from the Second World War has progressively been replaced by a (neo) liberal paradigm.

Historically, academics were accountable to their peers mainly through the production and discussion of knowledge. Through the combination of massification, reductions in public funds and increasing political and societal concerns about the use of public resources, the notion of accountability acquired other dimensions. During the 1980s, it was directed to ensure that HE institutions' activities were consistent with the general policies developed along the lines of the evaluative state. New accountability concerns addressed the use of the funding received from public bodies and the extent to which HE institutions were able to meet the demands of governments and societies.

Once again, the emphasis on accountability in HE and its translation into policies were neither specific to the domain of HE nor consistent, in time or shape, throughout the countries. On the one hand, Taylor has made it clear that the 1980s was the period of the rise of the "audit society" (Taylor 1997). The form of accountability that emerged in HE at that time echoed a more general audit explosion observable throughout the domains of public activity. On the other hand, national responses tended to differ in two ways. The first was the moment when changes in the national policy context began to take place. Concerns about public accountability emerged earlier in the United Kingdom (UK) and the Netherlands than, for instance, in Switzerland, Germany or Spain. The second difference related to the mechanisms set up to ensure that the new forms of accountability concerns were addressed in the universities. At this stage, the discussion moved away from mere accountability concerns to enter the domain of the practical responses. These were multiple and varied and, most of the time, related to the formulation of systematised policies for quality assurance.

1.3. The European Context

In the European context, the above trends have recently been complemented with concerns for greater harmonisation of national policies. These concerns emanate from different sources. First, supra-national political institutions, in particular the Council of the European Union, have produced several documents in which broad guidelines for HE in Europe are discerned. Among these documents, the 1991 *Memorandum on Higher Education* is particularly relevant (EC 1991). Not only is it the first document directly addressing the issue of HE but it also sketches the general objectives national systems should aim at in this domain. Second, non-governmental organisations involved in HE have also embraced the issue of harmonisation. This is the case, for instance, of the *Association of European*

Universities (CRE) as well as the *Confederation of European Union Rector's Conferences* (EUREC) and their involvement in the preparation of the Bologna Declaration[3]. The Declaration further established the harmonisation of national policies for HE as a priority (Bologna Declaration 1999). Consequently, European countries have been confronted not only with similar macro-trends such as those discussed above but are also under growing pressure from formal or informal agendas to coordinate their respective policies for HE.

A number of general questions arise from these observations: how do different European countries react to these pressures and trends? Do they tend to formulate similar responses or are they offering different responses to similar issues? If their responses are similar, why is that? If they differ, what factors can help to better understand the differences?
These are crucial questions to ask, especially in a context of increasing internationalisation. Recent events have highlighted the progressive loss of national prerogatives in a number of policy domains. This is particularly true as regards economic, defence and foreign policies. As regards education, there is less evidence that nations are also losing control of the formulation of their policies. Studying the domain of education and training, Avis *et al.* (1996) consider that national governments still retain substantial prerogatives. A similar conclusion is reached by Green *et al.* (1999: 3-32) in their analysis of educational systems in Europe when they affirm that national education policies do not necessarily converge towards a standardised model, although they are under pressure from trans-national trends. Such a position is worth investigating in the domain of HE. This is done, for instance, by Green and Hayward (1997) in their analysis of the impact of the changing environment on the universities. For the authors, change cannot be avoided and requires action. This situation is not limited to a certain number of countries but affects all of them. However, Green and Hayward underline a crucial point about how change takes shape in a particular place when they note that:

> "While the pressures and demands for change take on different shapes in each country, they are not bounded by national borders or geography (...) Each of these [the seven elements that push for transformation into HE – access, funding, economic and social development, accountability, autonomy, technology and internationalization] affects higher education differently in different settings, but that seems more a function of point in time that a difference in kind."
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> Green and Hayward 1997: 6

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[3] The CRE and the EUREC merged into the *European University Association* (EUA) in March 2001.

In this sense, Green and Hayward recognise the importance of the national variable in the impact of trans-national trends. Nevertheless, it seems that the stimulating statement – i.e. change takes different forms according to the national context - is not translated into a theoretical framework that would allow for an understanding of cross-national differences and/or similarities. If trans-national trends affect countries differently, it is possible to argue that it is because each country presents some peculiarities that make it difficult for identical responses to emerge. But what are these differences? Moreover, if the responses are different, is it only because national HE systems have their own history or do other elements also have to be taken into account?

The present study aims to address such issues both theoretically and empirically. Unfortunately there is neither room nor time for a comprehensive review of all the European countries and their respective HE policies. The scope has to be reduced both geographically and as regards the object of analysis. Consequently, only four countries will be taken into consideration: England, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland, from the perspective of the policies developed in the domain of quality assurance of teaching. Later in the study, the reasons that have led to the selection of the four countries are explained. For the moment, it is sufficient to say that the countries combine centralised polities (England and the Netherlands) and decentralised ones (Spain and Switzerland) with subsequent variations in the structure of policy-making and, potentially, in the form of policy outputs. Quality assurance has been chosen as a pertinent policy area to investigate because of the importance it has gained over the last two decades or so.

In the European context, the development of quality assurance policy began to take place in the first half of the 1980s. The French National Committee for Evaluation (*Comité National d'Evaluation* - CNE) was set up in January 1984 to systematically evaluate the activities of all the institutions of HE (Staropoli 1987). The particularity of the French CNE was that it was made accountable directly to the President of the Republic and not the Minister of Education, which reminds us that the issue of quality assurance in the French context was seen as transcending party struggles. In the Netherlands, the publication of the 1985 policy paper *Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality* (HOAK – *Hoger Onderwijs: Autonomie and Kwaliteit*) marked a shift towards greater room for manoeuvre for the universities as well as new types of relationships with the political authorities. Simultaneously, the patterns of

control and evaluation of the institutions' activities were standardised within *ex post* procedures and put under the responsibility of the institutions' umbrella organisations. In England, quality assurance in HE was placed high on the agenda of the Conservative government of Mrs Thatcher, especially from the mid-1980s onwards.
Consequently, by the early 1990s, the practice of quality control through regular evaluations at national level had been established in four European countries: the Netherlands, France, the UK and Denmark.

Concerns for co-ordinated policies became more visible during the first half of the 1990s when some experiments were undertaken under the monitoring of the European Union. The most significant was the *European Pilot Project for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education* that compared how European countries assessed teaching in HE (EC 1995; Thune 1997). The Pilot Project was a first attempt to outline the practice of quality assurance among Member States and to identify potential future orientations. One of these took the form of a Recommendation published by the Council of the European Union in September 1998 (EC 1998). As a result of the Recommendation, it was expected that all Member States would facilitate implementation of the required structure for improving the quality of educational provision in HE[4]. Eventually, the Pilot Project and the 1998 Recommendation led to the creation of a European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) to promote and encourage co-operation at the European level in the domain of quality assurance in HE.

1.4. The Research Problem and Research Questions

Against this background, the general issues posed above have been narrowed down and reformulated into the following research problem:

> **Are the policies for quality assurance in HE that have been developed in England, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland converging or diverging and to what extent are they doing so?**

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[4] The Council also described the general features national systems of quality assurance should be based upon. These features were: autonomy and/or independence of the bodies responsible for quality assurance at the national level as regards the choice of methods and procedures; the adaptation of quality assurance procedures to the specificities of each HE institution; targeted use of the internal and/or external dimensions of quality assurance according to the procedures and methods; involvement of the different actors concerned with quality assurance at national level and publication, in the most suitable form for the Member State, of the results of the procedures (EC 1998: Recommendation I § B).

Behind this formulation lies the assumption that if different countries confront the similar trends discussed earlier by developing similar policies, we could be experiencing a process of convergence towards an increasingly common structure of quality assurance policy in European HE. Consequently, it could be argued that national features[5] do not significantly affect the shape of policy outcomes: trans-national trends and pressures for harmonisation are too powerful. By contrast, if different countries tend to formulate different types of policies to respond to similar trends and pressures, it could be argued that convergence is not taking place. Trans-national trends in HE would consequently be the object of a re-reading within the context of a national environment.

On the basis of the research problem, eight more specific research questions have been formulated. They are as follows:

1. **How can the notions of policy and policy convergence best be characterised for the purposes of the present study?**
2. **How can the notion of quality assurance best be characterised for the purposes of the present study?**
3. **What factors can be considered determinant as regards quality assurance policies in HE? How can they best be characterised for the purposes of the present study?**
4. **How can the convergence and/or divergence of quality assurance policies best be conceptualised for the purposes of the present study?**
5. **What kind of quality assurance policies are found in England, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland?**
6. **What differences and/or similarities can be highlighted across these empirical cases?**
7. **How can these differences and/or similarities be related to the different factors considered to be most influential as regards quality assurance policies in HE?**
8. **What does this relation or absence of relation reveal as regards potential future orientations?**

The answer to these questions can only emerge from a comparison of the policies formulated and implemented in the domain of quality assurance in the four countries. This has two immediate consequences. The first is the question of the comparative method itself and the epistemological position adopted here to address it. The second consequence, which stems

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[5] These are discussed at length in chapter 3. For the moment, it is sufficient to note that it encompasses the following dimensions: the organisational features of national HE systems; national political institutions; the political organisation of the territory and its subsequent consequences on the organisation of policy domains.

from the previous one, relates to the conceptualisation of the relationship between moment and process. Both consequences relate to methodological considerations that are extensively discussed later in the study. They will permit the epistemological standpoint adopted by the present author as well as his particular approach to comparative studies in HE to be highlighted.

For the time being, the study progresses towards the construction of the theoretical framework. This is undertaken in two stages. First, chapter 2 examines the notion of policy and policy convergence. It does so by developing an approach in terms of policy paradigms. Chapter 3 then translates the discussion of policy paradigms into the more specific domain of quality assurance in HE.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Considerations

2.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework of the study. It approaches quality assurance as a policy domain and considers the policies developed therein. To that end, the discussion uses concepts borrowed from the literature on policy analysis.

Section 2.2 outlines the particularity of policy analysis for the study of HE before addressing the notion of policy itself. It is argued that a public policy encompasses two different but complementary dimensions: an ideational one, based on normative beliefs about how a policy domain should be organised, and a material one composed of the instruments translating ideas and beliefs into action. Such a distinction concedes a crucial role to the ideational component of public policy. From this perspective, section 2.3 discusses the role of ideas in policy analysis and their operationalisation for the purpose of the present study. The notion of policy paradigm is brought forward to account for the double dimension of public policies and is constructed on the basis of the determination of fundamental choices within a policy domain and their temporal and spatial actualisation. Section 2.4 combines the discussion on policies and paradigms with the concerns about policy convergence. The section concludes with the construction of a theoretical framework within which the outcomes of the cross-national comparisons can be located. Finally, section 2.5 summarises the principal arguments of the chapter.

2.2. Quality Assurance as a Policy Domain

The study considers quality assurance as a policy domain located within the broader domain known as HE. Such an approach places the object of investigation within an intellectual tradition whose roots lie outside (higher) education as a field of study (Teichler 1996b). This intellectual tradition can be summed up under the general label of policy analysis or, as more commonly known in the political sciences, studies of public policy and administration[6].

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[6] This categorisation is taken from the widely accepted consensus regarding the distribution of academic work within the disciplines. In the present case, the choice derives from the position adopted by Goodin and Klingemann in their *New Handbook of Political Science* (1996).

As a field of knowledge, policy analysis is composed of a wide range of disciplines, models and theories (Wildawsky 1979: 15). Therefore, policy analysis requires the adoption of a multidisciplinary approach to social problems, an approach able to account for the conceptual devices of institutionalised academic areas and to acknowledge the importance of the historical, societal, legal and institutional contexts within which policies are formulated and implemented. Scholars involved in policy analysis pursue a variety of concerns. These can address the links between a "problem" and the policies formulated to address it or the content of a policy. They can deal with the action (or absence of action) of policy makers or be concerned with the impact of a public policy in terms of outputs and outcomes (Parsons 1996: 29).

In comparative studies, policy analysis can be considered as a "field of study concerned with variations in the products of governmental activity over time and across different jurisdictions" (Hofferbert and Cingranelli 1996: 593). From another perspective, Heidenheimer *et al.* (1990: 3) consider comparative public policy as "the study of how, why and to what effect different governments pursue a particular course of action or inaction". These three questions summarise well the three stages of the policy cycle generally addressed in the literature: policy formulation, policy implementation and policy evaluation. The frameworks within which they are addressed empirically are multiple. They reflect authors' preferences in terms of explanatory variables or theoretical lines of thought[7].

HE studies have not been exempted from the influence of the policy analysis approach[8]. Despite Premfors' remark that researchers in the area of HE do not take a crucial part in the development of policy analysis as a (sub)discipline (Premfors 1992: 1910), the interest of these researchers for policy analysis has grown considerably in recent years. They have engaged in the theoretical avenues opened by the proponents of policy analysis and taken up

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7 This ternary classification is one among the many different alternatives that can be found in the literature. They all derive from the so-called stagist approach to policy-making originally endorsed by Simon (1976/1945) and Laswell (1956). The number of stages the policy process goes through varies from one author to the other. For instance, Simon (1976/1945) considered three, Lasswell (1956) seven, Rose (1973) made it twelve and Hogwood and Gunn (1984) nine. For a general discussion of the concept of policy cycle, see May and Wildavsky (*Eds* 1978), for a critique see Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993).

8 There is a vast amount of literature on the subject among which the following have been of particular help for the present study: Ball 1990; Becher and Kogan 1992; Braun and Merrien *Eds* 1999; Capano 1996, 1998; Cerych and Sabatier 1986; Goedegebuure *et al. Eds* 1994; Kogan 1975, *Ed.* 1989, 1996, 1997; Kogan and Hanney 2000; Kogan *et al.* 2000; Teichler 1988, 1992; van Vught *Ed.* 1989.

most of their concerns. They have done so on a national or cross-national perspective, thus providing a wide range of investigations.

The present study takes on this tradition by concentrating on more recent developments within the discipline, namely the role of ideas in policy analysis. Its concerns are with the "problem" of quality assurance, the responses to address it in terms of public policies, and the content of these policies. The theoretical foundations aim to discuss the notions of public policy and policy convergence in order to construct a framework to assess whether and to what extent the quality assurance policies of the four countries analysed here are converging. To that end, it is proposed to look for configurations of factors highlighting how the two dimensions of public policies interact in practice.

This objective has several ontological, epistemological and methodological implications that are discussed at length later in the study (see chapter 4). It also stresses the necessity to carefully specify the components of a public policy. This notion has been extensively discussed in the political science literature (Heclo 1972; Lasswell 1970, 1971; Lindblom 1959; Peters 1986; Wildawsky 1979). As Heclo notes, policy is not a self-evident notion and cannot be straightforwardly defined. Two characteristics seem, nonetheless, to be salient. First, Heclo sees policy as a "middle-range" concept "bigger than particular decisions but smaller than general social movements" (Heclo 1972: 84). It relates to more or less long sequences of activities undertaken under governmental action and their consequences, rather than to limited and isolated decisions. This view is interesting because it highlights the importance of duration in the analysis of public policy. It permits the questioning of the before/after dichotomy (Dobry 1986) by looking at the elements of continuity within a given policy domain. The second characteristic of a policy, as pointed out by Heclo, has a more practical sense inasmuch as it encompasses some kind of "purposiveness" (Heclo 1972: 84). This implies that those legitimated to formulate a policy do so with a certain objective in mind. Whether this objective is achieved is a question that can only be verified empirically. What is certain, however, is that the purposes of the policy will not necessarily be reflected in their outcomes, as non-intended consequences may derive from the action undertaken. At the heart of the notion of policy lies, thus, the project of action (or non-action) encompassed in a group's programme to accomplish some end.

In the present study, the term policy is understood as the proposals formulated by governmental authorities as a course of action in a particular domain. It is a construction

based on beliefs about the organisation of that domain, which results in the formulation of instruments through which the beliefs are translated into action. From this perspective, it is possible to argue that a policy is formed of two different, though inter-connected, dimensions. The first can be referred to as the ideational dimension and relates to the normative elements that support public action. The second dimension, the material one, consists of the instruments developed as a means for public action.

The distinction between the ideational and material dimensions of public policies[9] offers a double advantage compared to current approaches to quality assurance in HE. First, it can prove helpful in fully assessing cross-national policy convergence. Most empirical work on quality assurance in HE limits itself to the study of the procedures used, thus failing to appreciate the actual extent of convergence. In effect, national policies may (or may not) use similar procedures to assess quality but these are just one aspect of the policy and many others are still to be investigated, among which are the beliefs supporting the implementation of particular procedures. The second advantage is that the ideational/material distinction permits the policy under investigation to be de-naturalised[10] by showing that it is the result of a social construction and that it echoes wider trends within which the policy makes sense.

The following paragraphs discuss the relation between the ideational and material dimensions of public policies. First the relevance of the distinction is assessed and the two dimensions are described, then they are combined under the notion of policy paradigm.

2.3. Ideas and Public Policy Analysis

As an analytical category, the ideational dimension of public policy has gained increasing interest among academic circles in recent years (Colander and Coats *Eds* 1989; Hall *Ed.* 1989; Hannah 1990; Kingdon 1984). If interest in ideas is not in itself new, attempts have been made to integrate ideational elements within broader and more traditional explanatory frameworks of policy outcomes. New attention to the role of ideas is manifest in studies on the influence of think tanks (Smith 1990; Weiss 1992), in the analyses of international

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9 In this study, policy and public policy are considered synonyms.

10 De-naturalisation is understood as the intellectual process by which an observed social phenomenon is re-immersed in the context of its production, thus highlighting its contingency. The contingency of a public policy has to be shown in relation to the material and ideational dimensions in order to demonstrate how they respond to particular spatial and temporal conditions.

relations (Goldstein and Keohane *Eds* 1993) and of the structures and roles of epistemic communities (Haas 1990; Sabatier 1993). Ideas are also present in the study of international economics (Colander and Coats *Eds* 1989; Hall 1986) and social policy (Jenson 1989; Skocpol 1992, 1996). They are, finally, reflected in discussions on policy-making (Jobert and Muller 1987; Faure *et al. Eds* 1995) and policy change (Majone 1991). These studies provide different insights into the formulation and spread of ideas and shed light on how they influence policy-making, while recognising that ideas are just one of the elements involved in this process[11].

Despite increasing interest, there is still a lack of theory about the role of ideas in public policy. Ideas themselves are not an easy concept to understand. They are generally referred to as values, beliefs or views about how things should be. Emphasis is put on their normative character, their immateriality. A good example of this is the definition adopted by Goldstein and Keohane (1993). For them, ideas are "beliefs held by individuals" (1993: 3) and can be grouped into three main categories: worldviews, principled beliefs and causal beliefs (Ibidem: 9-11). Beliefs as worldviews refer to wide perceptions of how things should be, thus defining a general framework within which to locate oneself. Principled beliefs help to distinguish between what is "right" and what is "wrong", what is "just" and what is "unjust". These principles are deeply rooted in people's minds and are derived from socialisation in a particular society or social group. Finally, causal beliefs establish a cause-effect relationship between two, or more, dimensions of social life. This type of belief provides general guidelines about how a given objective can be reached.

The authors emphasise the differences among the three notions in order to obtain clear categories. By so doing, however, they underestimate the interdependency of the notions. Two points are particularly problematic and examples from HE can highlight them. First, worldviews on the role of the state in the organisation of HE systems cannot be translated into practice if "principles" about what is "just" and "unjust" about it are not already formed. Considering that the state should step back from HE is a view that implies the pre-existence of principles about it, so that it is accepted by its proponents, who act accordingly. Similarly, distinguishing between the three types of beliefs does not necessarily help in analysing how ideas influence policy-making. In fact, policy formulation combines the three types of beliefs

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[11] Other elements could include political institutions, social and economic conditions and previous policies.

within a single general worldview, which makes the distinction of little empirical help. The second problem with Goldstein and Keohane's approach to the notion of worldview lies in its inability to account for the plurality of concurrent worldviews and the process by which some become more powerful than others as regards the organisation of policy domains. This point is important. Analysing the emergence of particular views on the organisation of a particular policy domain implies relating them to developments in other domains and, indeed, in society at large. In this sense, approaching the production of particular policies as the translation into a specific policy domain of broader dominant values and norms crucially helps to re-contextualise the entire process of policy production.

To sum up, Goldstein and Keohane's approach offer a disentangled and static image of how the ideational dimension can prove useful for the study of HE policy. By referring to the notion of policy paradigm, one can integrate the ideational dimension into a more dynamic framework.

2.3.1. A Paradigm Approach to Public Policy

According to Jenson (1989), a policy paradigm can be understood as a:

> "(...) shared set of interconnected premises which make sense of many social relations. (...) Every paradigm contains a view of human nature, a definition of basic and proper forms of social relations among equals and among those in relationships of hierarchy, and specification of relations among institutions as well as a stipulation of the role of such institutions."
>
> Jenson 1989: 239

Jenson's approach follows Kuhn's description of change in science (Kuhn 1970). As a metaphor, Kuhn's description can be transposed into the arena of public policy because government action, like scientific knowledge, is based on beliefs supporting the formulation of a systematised policy in a given domain.

Before entering a detailed discussion of the relationship between paradigms and ideas, two points have to be made. First, if the policy paradigm is widely accepted throughout the domain it governs, it is said to be hegemonic. In this case, alternatives will have little room for progression. But this is not always the case. Opponents may contest the validity and relevance of a dominant paradigm. If contradictions intensify, a paradigm crisis occurs where the previously dominant policy paradigm is no longer pertinent to address the problems emerging from the transformation of other social fields. Second, a policy paradigm can be

called "societal" inasmuch as it is a "national" response to trans-national trends. Here, the difference is stated between the views about the organisation of the policy domain that are dominant at the international level and their national re-definition. In that sense, the response results from a particular way of addressing the trends, which stems from the political and societal features of each country. Therefore, the way different countries address similar trends in HE or other domains may differ.

2.3.1.1. Production and Spread of Ideas: Kuhn's and Lakatos' Perspectives

In his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), Kuhn considers that a paradigm encompasses two dimensions:

> "On the one hand, it stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community. On the other, it denotes one sort of elements in that constellation, the concrete puzzle-solutions which, employed as models or examples, can replace explicit rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles of normal science."
>
> Kuhn 1970: 175

Kuhn's statement stresses the importance of the ideational dimension in the construction of the community and the institutionalisation of ways to address problems. Referring to the production of scientific knowledge, Kuhn distinguishes between two different periods. The first is referred to as "normal" science and is characterised by an agreement on the paradigm that can cope with any emerging problem. When this is no longer the case, a paradigm crisis occurs. In this case, a situation has emerged that is not "understandable" under the former set of beliefs and is not solvable under the traditional patterns of action. If no modifications are made to the traditional paradigm to account for the new situation and to propose alternatives, it will have to be radically transformed, which would lead to a paradigm shift.

Transposed into the field of policy analysis, this approach can be understood as follows. Each policy is composed of two different elements: the material and the ideational. The first refers to the implementation of the policy, the tools used to make it as efficient as possible and the procedures of evaluation of the policy. The ideational dimension, on the contrary, is the set of cognitive values and norms underpinning the production of new policies in a given domain. As noted, however, the ideational dimension of public policies tends to be similar from one domain to another. In this respect, the emergence of a new sectoral policy has to be

understood as the expression, in that particular domain, of a wider worldview (Jobert and Muller 1987).

2.3.1.2. Protective Belt and Paradigm Core

Lakatos' conceptual apparatus for the study of research programmes[12] can prove helpful in understanding the progressive evolution towards policy change (Lakatos 1968; Lakatos and Musgrave 1974; see also Majone 1991: 291-295). The Hungarian scholar differentiates between two components of a research programme: the core and the protective belt. The core refers to the fundamental methodological orientations dominating the entire programme. It consists of hard values, beliefs and norms acting as the ideational basis governing all behaviours and actions. The protective belt is the "set of hypotheses and specific predictions that can be submitted to the test of empirical evidence without compromising the integrity of the core" (Majone 1991: 191). They are the elements that protect the fundamental assumptions of the programme by continuously adapting themselves to the results of empirical tests. They are more flexible and can be modified more easily thus allowing the general structure to continue to exist (Sabatier 1993). From this perspective, scientific change occurs progressively through a movement going from the exterior to the interior, i.e. from the protective belt towards the core of research programmes. Following Lakatos, the protective belt can be understood as the material counterpart to the ideational core elements.

The paradigm approach referred to above can gain from the combination with the research programme one. Both Kuhn and Lakatos pay tribute to the ideational dimension in the production of scientific knowledge. The existence of a set of common beliefs shared among a scientific community is at the heart of their analysis, though leading to different views about the process of change itself. Kuhn refers to scientific change as a revolution, stressing a more radical path towards new dominant theories. This view can be misleading when it comes to analyse change in public policy. Contrary to Kuhn, through the research programme

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[12] Lakatos' philosophy of science is based on the premise that there is not knowledge, but growth of knowledge. From there he attempts to specify why this premise should be true. To that end, he considers a research program navigating among anomalies (observations that contradict theory). All theories are born false, but some are better than others in that they account for all the old results and predict new ones. A theory cannot be rejected on the basis of observation unless a superior alternative theory exists. A succession of such theories is called a research program. In this regard, Lakatos considers that theories do not exist in isolation but are closely inter-connected within a general framework of ideas. Therefore, in order to account for the growth of knowledge, one should not focus on one single theory but on the constellation of theories that exist, i.e. the research programme (Majone 1991: 191).

approach, Lakatos provides more helpful elements. His distinction between the core and the protective belt allows the re-introduction of the temporal dimension less explicitly referred to by Kuhn. By differentiating the core from the protective elements, Lakatos leaves room for an analysis of the process going from the erosion of the protective belt to the attack on the core values.

So far, the discussion has referred to Kuhn and Lakatos' terminology and their respective views about the growth of knowledge. The following section relates this terminology to the study of policy paradigms and policy domains.

2.3.2. Policy Paradigms and Policy Domains

The construction of the quality assurance policy paradigm is worth some discussion. First, a policy paradigm encompasses dimensions related to the particular domain under investigation and to broader domains of which the one studied is a part. Second, a policy paradigm is always time- and space-dependent, i.e. influenced by the moment(s) nations are experiencing. To highlight the relevance of this approach for the study of quality assurance policy, a *detour* through the broader domain of HE policy can be useful.

In his discussion of policy analysis in HE, Premfors outlines the existence of six fundamental choices. These relate to issues of size, structure, location, admission, governance and curricula (Premfors 1992: 1911). These issues are considered as elements to be addressed by all HE policies. For the Swedish scholar, policy formation in HE then results from the application of five basic values - excellence, equality, autonomy, accountability and efficiency - to the six fundamental choices (Premfors 1992: 1912).

Despite the similarities, the present study only partially endorses Premfors' views. In effect, arguing that policy formation in HE results from the combination of the fundamental choices with the basic values can be misleading. The problem is that the elements presented by Premfors as the basic values in HE, actually reflect features that have gained major importance in the last two decades or so, thus being already spatially and temporally located. They are not basic values, i.e. values that are not subject to variation over time and space, but policy responses to debates that have been taking place in HE since the mid-1970s, thus highlighting the structure of a particular policy paradigm *that has become dominant* in the

European context and beyond. As a matter of fact, Premfors' presentation of the basic values best highlights the transformation that has taken place in the terms used in HE in recent years. In relation to the above discussion of Kuhn's and Lakatos' theoretical standpoints, a paradigm shift has occurred from notions such as academic freedom and professional integrity to accountability, efficiency and social responsibility. This shift corresponds to a redefinition of the place of HE within society where the previous structure of the policy domain, in terms of beliefs and instruments, is questioned in a context marked by expansion, financial cutbacks and increased influence of the economic value of HE for national wealth, among other trends.

From this perspective, the responses to the fundamental choices in HE policy are not to be found according to pre-determined values, as Premfors suggests. Rather, the basic values upon which responses to the fundamental choices are provided are not fixed once and for all but are always space- and time-dependent. How these responses are formed is an issue that can only be addressed empirically by assessing the role played by a certain number of factors. As Premfors notes, the fundamental choices are the basic issues all systems of HE have to deal with through the formulation and implementation of particular policies. The process of policy formation can therefore be seen as the actualisation of these fundamental choices in different temporal and spatial settings. In this regard, the identification of the fundamental choices of a particular domain is a crucial stage in the study of cross-national policy convergence inasmuch as the convergence can only be assessed through the responses to the fundamental choices. The fundamental choices are actualised into particular policies consisting, as noted, of an ideational and a material dimension. The combination of these two dimensions, as responses to the fundamental choices, constitute the paradigm governing, at a given moment and in a given place, the policy domain under investigation. The present discussion is based on the domain of HE policy in general. Chapter 3 develops the discussion further in order to address the particular domain of quality assurance policy. Before that, it is important to relate the fundamental choices in a policy domain to the paradigm governing that domain. It is here that the analogy with Kuhn's and Lakatos' approaches becomes relevant.

The actualisation of the fundamental policy choices of a policy domain can be regarded as the formulation of a particular policy for that domain. Once actualised in a particular place

and at a particular moment of time, the policy domain will be governed by a policy paradigm, i.e. a combination of the ideational and material dimensions of the policy. The ideational dimension relates to the basic beliefs about the organisation of the domain and the objectives it should aim at. These beliefs encompass values and norms upon which a majority of the actors concerned agree, or at least those actors with sufficient resources to impose their own worldviews. These beliefs are then translated into practice through the formulation of different sets of instruments as means to address the fundamental choices of the domain. In this regard, the actualisation of the fundamental policy choices, i.e. the formulation of a public policy, reflects choices deriving from beliefs about the organisation of the policy domain as well as from more formal constraints such as the political organisation of the territory, the structure of the decision-making process and the level of responsibility of different political levels over policy domains.

The previous sections highlighted how the notion of policy is addressed in the present study. Based on the elements discussed so far, the next section constructs a theoretical framework for the study of policy convergence. This framework is based on the assumption that variation among national policies can be observed at two different levels. The first is the level of the ideational elements supporting the policy; the second is the level of the instruments used to translate the beliefs into practice. The relationship between the two is not automatic and requires closer scrutiny. This is done in the coming paragraphs by first pointing out that policy convergence can be heuristically useful only if analysed in parallel with its counterpart, i.e. policy divergence, and second, by distinguishing between moment and process as two stages of the analysis of cross-national policy convergence.

2.4. Framing Policy Convergence

In his study on industrial societies, Kerr (1983) defined the notion of convergence as the "tendency of societies to grow more alike, to develop similarities in structures, processes and performances" (Kerr 1983: 3). This view reflects the macro-level argument on convergence according to which the industrialisation of modern societies provokes the setting in motion of certain processes, which, over time, will tend to shape social structures, political processes and public policies in a similar way (Bennett 1991: 216-218).

Reviews of the literature on policy convergence show that the emphasis is generally put on the process through which similar policies are adopted by different governments (Bennett 1991; Dolowitz and Marsh 1996). To a large extent, most empirical works address policies that *are considered* to be converging. These works then analyse either the contents or the instruments of the policies and investigate the processes through which convergence takes place. Emphasis is therefore put on policy borrowing, policy learning or policy transfer (Hall 1993, Rose 1993; Wolman 1992). Such an approach, however, does not fit with this study's concerns to assess whether and to what extent national policies for quality assurance in HE are converging. Addressing these issues implies that the actual convergence must be established after a comparison of the policies and not be assumed so *a priori*. In fact, determining whether and to what extent two, or more, policies are converging is an indispensable prerequisite for subsequent analyses of how the process of convergence comes about and to what it can lead.

For that purpose, two points have to be made. First, convergence, as a conceptual device, gains from being analysed together with its antonym, i.e. divergence. This expands the number of possible understandings of two policies that might be found, after an empirical investigation, not to converge. It does so because it would permit one to say that two policies that do not converge, do not necessarily diverge but can also remain in a state of persisting difference or persistent similarity. Consequently, talking about policy convergence/divergence requires the identification of a common structure to which national policies are converging or from which they are diverging. Following the discussions in sections 2.2 and 2.3, such a structure can be considered to be the overall policy paradigm governing a policy domain. In this sense, policy convergence/divergence can be researched either at the level of the policy beliefs and/or the policy instruments used to translate the beliefs into practice.

The second point to be made is that the notion of convergence has to be seen as a process of *becoming* more similar and not as a state of *being* more similar. In this sense, a distinction needs to be made between diachrony and synchrony as two analytical levels. This distinction is further discussed below. For the time being, it is sufficient to say that it makes it possible to oppose *policy convergence/divergence* and policies that *are similar/different* in certain aspects. In the former case, one is dealing with a movement, with policies in the process of becoming more similar while, in the latter, emphasis is put on policies that have become, and

therefore are, more similar/different as regards their ideational or material dimensions. Consequently, two or more policies can be said to be converging only once they have been compared. When studying a single policy, one accounts for the characteristics of the two dimensions of this policy at the moment of the observation. From this observation, one can go back in time to understand why the policy has become so, i.e. the process. Eventually, potential future orientations can be sketched out based on knowledge of the past. A comparison of the empirical observations allows an assessment of the extent of cross-national policy convergence/divergence by looking at the beliefs and instruments of the policy. The conclusions of the comparison can result in national policies adopting one of the orientations presented in Figure 2.2 below.

FIGURE 2.1. OUTLINE OF POTENTIAL CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISONS OF POLICIES.

1. …. Convergence The policies were different but are becoming increasingly similar.	2. …. Divergence The policies were similar but are becoming increasingly different.
3. … Persistent differences The policies were already different in the past and remain so nowadays.	4. … Persistent similarities The policies were similar in the past and remain so nowadays.

In the first case, it is assumed that national policies were not converging in the past but that, at a given moment and under particular circumstances, they began to move in the same direction. The second hypothetical case is the exact opposite of the previous one and argues that the national policies under investigation were once similar but have been moving away from each other over time. This argument is based on the assumption that for national policies to be diverging, they need to have been similar in the past. The third and fourth cases assume that the national policies were neither converging nor diverging but were in a state of persisting difference/similarity. Two elements have to be discerned here. By persistent difference(s), it is suggested that national policies were different at a given moment of the past and are still different at the moment when the observation is made. Symmetrically, the

notion of persistent similarity suggests that national policies were already showing common characteristics in the past and still do so at the moment of observation. These four cases are conceptual abstractions of the potential conclusions cross-national comparisons of national policies can lead to. They can help the researcher to determine whether national policies are actually converging, diverging or continuing on previous tracks.

2.5. Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, the theoretical framework for the study of cross-national policy convergence in quality assurance in HE was constructed. For that purpose, quality assurance was approached as a public policy formed, like any other public policy, by an ideational and a material dimension. The combination of these two dimensions at a given moment of time and in a given place provides the structure of the policy paradigm governing the domain under investigation, in this case the domain of quality assurance. The structure of the policy paradigm results from the actualisation of the fundamental choices of the policy domain. This is done by, first, formulating ideas and beliefs about the general organisation of the domain in a particular spatial and temporal location (the policy beliefs) and, second, by translating these beliefs into policy instruments.

The theoretical construction of the policy paradigm was complemented with a discussion of the notion of policy convergence. Here, it was argued that national policies could converge, diverge or continue on previous patterns. The actual orientation can only emerge from cross-national comparisons of the two dimensions of the policy. Such an approach can prove useful for the study of cross-national policy convergence inasmuch as it allows going beyond the immediate observation of the structure of the policy paradigm and addressing the ideational substract underpinning it. Therefore, it permits a more accurate determination of the extent of the convergence among national policies.

A definite answer to the question of the extent of policy convergence can only be provided after a detailed analysis of each national policy. This analysis will follow the arguments presented in this chapter. On the one hand, it will reflect the distinction between moment and process. On the other hand, this analysis will permit the identification of the structure of the paradigm currently dominating the domain of quality assurance policy in each country and,

through the diachronic perspective, the reconstruction of the process through which it has come about. This will be the task of each country report. Before that, it is necessary to determine what aspects of quality assurance the present study addresses and how it does so. This is the task of the next chapter.

Chapter 3 Adapting the Paradigm Approach to the Study of Quality Assurance Policy

3.1. Introduction

The objective of the present chapter is to draw on and expand the theoretical discussion of chapter 2 for the study of quality assurance policy in HE. The elements addressed relate to the fundamental choices in the domain of quality assurance policy and their actualisation in a set of systematised policies. To that end, section 3.2 briefly discusses the notion of quality assurance in HE and outlines some experiences in the European context. It argues that cross-national comparisons cannot be based on an *a priori* definition of quality assurance and advocates a constructivist approach based on the theoretical framework presented in chapter 2. Against this background, section 3.3 outlines the fundamental choices in the domain of quality assurance policy and sketches out a number of potential responses. Based on this discussion, section 3.4 addresses the factors at play in the actualisation of these fundamental choices. This is done by distinguishing between the *emergence* of the quality assurance as a political issue, and its *translation* into a set of systematised policies. Finally, section 3.6 summarises the principal points presented in the chapter.

3.2. Approaches to Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Generalisation of the political concern for quality assurance in HE has developed alongside theoretical debates on the concept of quality itself (Westerheijden *et al. Eds* 1994). Scholars of and researchers in HE have devoted their time and patience to scrutinising its ambiguous and multifaceted meanings. Pirsig's exclamation "(...) it always goes poof" (1974: 179) has been widely quoted in the early texts on quality in HE to express the difficulty of providing a clear meaning of the word. Others have attempted to innovate in the rhetorical domain and Vroeijenstijn's image, though less popular in academic circles, had the merit of adding some glamour to the debate:

> "Quality is like love. Everybody talks about it. Everybody knows and feels when there is love. Everybody recognises it. But when we try to give a definition of it, we are standing with empty hands."
>
> Vroeijenstijn in Birtwistle 1996: 60

It was, however, Sir Christopher Ball who, in the mid-1980s, summed up the argument (Urwin 1985: 96-102). His exclamation, "what the hell is quality?" is now as well known as the actual answer: "nobody knows!" Because of the impossibility of determining a common and unique definition of quality, this type of discussion has been abandoned in favour of a more open approach to the notion (Westerheijden 1999: 235). The objective no longer consists of defining quality but of addressing its different dimensions, which shifts the discussion from abstract debates onto more technical aspects.

A good example of the difficulty of providing a single and common definition of quality in HE is provided by Harvey and Green (1993: 11-26; see also Green 1994: 12-17). The authors point out five different types of definitions: quality as excellence, quality as conformity to standards, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money and quality as transformation. These categories account for a range of different interpretations and underline relative characteristics of quality in HE. This point is crucial as regards the link between quality and its purpose(s). From another perspective, Frazer (1992: 10-11) lists five different dimensions of quality and related concepts: quality control, quality assurance, quality audit, accreditation and quality measurement. The differences among the notions relate to the scope of the procedures, the people involved therein or the use of the information. Three of these dimensions - quality control, quality assurance and quality audit - are also addressed, in their work for the European Community (EC), by van Vught and Westerheijden who complete the list with quality management, a fourth potential dimension (van Vught and Westerheijden 1993: 12). The Dutch scholars see these dimensions as the expression of the new methods that were developed in the domain of quality in HE in the late 1980s. In the theoretical debates, however, a consensus has emerged among scholars and practitioners that the idea of "fitness for purpose" can englobe most dimensions encompassed in the notion of quality assurance in HE (Westerheijden 1999: 235). It does so by stressing the fact that a concept such as quality cannot be abstractly defined but needs to be related to its purpose(s) and objective(s), which is a national question.

Moreover, assuming that different countries give different meanings to the notion of quality assurance does not imply a national consensus on these purposes and objectives. Rather, struggles exist within the national environment for the imposition of a legitimate definition of the concept and its practical translation into a set of policies. Struggles encompass an intricate net of actors originating from inside (academics, students, staff, etc) and/or outside

(political authorities, private research sponsors, etc) academia. These different actors, referred to in the literature as stakeholders (Brennan *et al.* 1992: 13-14; Davies 1998; Frederiks *et al.* 1994a), hold different perceptions about the missions, objectives and purposes of HE. From these different perceptions are derived distinct opinions of what quality assurance in HE should be and what instruments can best implement these particular views. Brennan *et al.* summarise this point very clearly when they argue that:

> "(...) there are at least as many definitions of quality in higher education as there are categories of stakeholders (...) *times* the number of purposes, or dimensions, these stakeholders distinguish."
>
> Brennan *et al.* 1992: 13 emphasis in the original

The reasons for these differences would deserve research of its own, which cannot be undertaken in the present study[13]. In addition, stakeholders need to be approached as generic categories whose actual structures can vary from country to country. It is as true for academics, students, political authorities, etc. as for the notion of quality. As generic categories, they can be found in all HE systems. However, their definition hardly reflects the category itself but, rather, what different national environments have made of it.

A way to bypass some of the problems related to the definition of quality assurance in HE is to address it as a policy domain and to determine the fundamental choices to be made therein. This approach is consistent with the theoretical framework developed earlier and allows for more straightforward cross-national comparisons. For this purpose, it is important to delimit the scope of the comparisons and the type of characteristics to be looked at. The delimitation of the scope needs, therefore, to be derived from explicit parameters. In order to prove heuristically useful, these parameters have to reflect the different practices of quality assurance in HE.

The practice of quality assurance has taken different forms. It has generally been referred to as a set of actions aimed at maintaining and improving the quality of the education, management and/or research in a particular institution or in the system as a whole. Some authors, following particular national experiences, offer an accurate description of this

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[13] It can be assumed that the actors involved in HE do not have similar objectives. Rather, because they are located in different positions in the policy domain, the various categories of actors pursue different interests. These can range from accountability to academic freedom; from maintaining the *status quo* to getting an appropriate degree for the labour market.

process. This, for instance, is the case of Gaither when he argues that quality assurance in New Zealand:

> "(...) includes checking that the quality control mechanisms, processes, techniques, and activities are in place, are being used and are effective."
>
> Gaither 1998: 3

There is nothing particularly wrong with that, might it be that the "conciseness, clarity, and lucidity" (Gaither 1998: 2) of quality assurance procedures are not of much help when it comes to comparing them with other international experiences. A comparative study based on an *a priori* and nationally formulated definition of quality assurance would not account for the variety of roads to quality assurance but for the extent to which different countries differ from or are similar to a particular one. Consequently, starting with a definition of what quality assurance is cannot be accepted if one's intention is to assess whether and to what extent national policies converge. To this particular end, it seems more appropriate to approach national quality assurance policy as the actualisation of a number of fundamental choices inherent to that policy domain. This avoids imposing a particular definition of quality assurance and permits the observation and analysis of the policies formulated in different countries to address quality assurance.

If adopting an *a priori* definition does not seem adequate for the purpose of the present study, quality assurance procedures will have to be addressed differently. This is to be done according to the theoretical discussion of chapter 2. There, it was pointed out that a policy domain was characterised by a number of fundamental choices. These do not depend on the moment and/or the place but their responses, as policies, do. The following section discusses the fundamental choices in the domain of quality assurance and offers a number of potential responses.

3.3. Fundamental Choices in Quality Assurance

Addressing the formulation of the policies for quality assurance in different countries by starting from a fixed definition of what quality is, can be misleading. Rather, cross-national differences and/or similarities of policies can best be highlighted by looking at how national policies constitute a temporal and spatial actualisation of the fundamental choices of the policy domain under investigation. As noted, these features have to reflect intrinsic elements

of the policy domain, elements that need to be addressed in any case, although the way this is achieved may vary across time and space. These features are constructed abstractions and, following Premfors (1992: 1911-1912), can be referred to as fundamental policy choices. Once identified, these fundamental policy choices offer a valuable basis for comparison inasmuch as they make it possible to look into the decisions that have been made to address them and how they differ from place to place as regards each dimension of the policy, i.e. the beliefs (or ideational dimension) and the instruments (or the material dimension).

With respect to the domain of quality assurance in HE, the fundamental choices to be made concern the following dimensions: *objectives*, *control*, *areas*, *procedures* and *uses*. They refer to the following questions:

- *Objectives*: What should be the aims and objectives of quality assurance?
- *Control*: Who should control the process of quality assurance?
- *Areas*: What are the domains covered by the quality assurance procedures?
- *Procedures*: How are the quality assurance procedures set up?
- *Uses*: How is the information collected used?

These five questions offer a general overview of quality assurance as a policy domain. They are general issues which actors involved in policy-making in quality assurance cannot avoid. The responses would reflect power relationships among the different actors, who struggle to impose particular worldviews and beliefs as to how the domain should be organised. It is important to note that some of the choices presented above are not only necessarily found in the domain of quality assurance. This is the case for the *objectives* that, to a large extent, constitute a key issue of every policy domain. What makes the uniqueness of the responses provided to the choices are the particularities of the context within which quality assurance is embedded. This point will imply questioning a number of factors that can mediate between the fundamental choices and the potential responses, which is dealt with later in the chapter.

The construction of general categories similar to the fundamental choices to address quality assurance is not uncommon in the literature (Harman 1998). This is generally done by pointing out certain categories from the observation of a number of cases. The studies then go on to inform the reader about how the different countries studied compare in each of the categories. The number of categories and the number of countries differ from case to case. For instance, van Vught and Westerheijden addressed five areas and discussed how France,

the Netherlands and England compared[14] (van Vught and Westerheijden 1993). Brennan (1997), drawing on van Vught and Westerheijden's categories[15], addresses the variations that can be found among different countries, thus offering fruitful information. However, as for the Dutch scholars, Brennan's description says little either about the reasons for the observed variations[16] or about the beliefs the observed procedures respond to. Reporting on the results of an international project, Thune (1998) follows a similar approach to describe how different countries show both similarities[17] and differences as regards quality assurance. As for the former cases, the author provides fruitful information on how the practice of quality assurance is undertaken but says little about the reasons for it.

Although it shares the concerns for the determination of clear categories through which quality assurance can be analysed, the present study departs from the above-mentioned works in two regards. First, it considers quality assurance as a policy domain within which policies are formulated. According to the theoretical discussion, these policies are assumed to encompass an ideational and a material dimension or, in other words, policy beliefs and policy instruments. Second, the present study identifies a-temporal and a-spatial choices to be made within the domain of quality assurance and, by assessing the national responses to them, determines whether and to what extent, cross-national convergence is taking place. In addition, by systematically assessing the importance of certain factors in both the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue and the formulation of a particular policy in that domain, the approach defended here can provide fruitful insights into the reasons for cross-national differences and/or similarities, something the above-mentioned studies fail to address.

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14 Their study provides a useful insight into the *procedures* developed for quality assurance, i.e. a part of the policy instruments, but says little about how they relate to their respective ideational bases, i.e. the policy beliefs. They offer a point of reference against which other countries could be compared but fail to provide a satisfactory analysis of the fundamental policy choices and only discuss a particular actualisation, i.e. the five categories they determine: the role of the "meta-agent", the mechanisms of "self evaluation", the development of peer reviews and the report of the results of the methods. As further discuss later, these constitute particular responses to the fundamental choices, responses reflecting, in this case, preferences as regards the procedures to be used.

15 Brennan adds another category: the objectives of quality assessment

16 However, he recognises that differences in the forms of authority within HE systems can affect the impact of quality assessment.

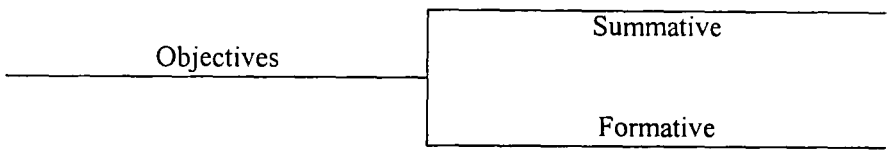
17 For Thune, the common elements are self-evaluation, peer review, site visits and the publication of the reports. Differences prevail, for instance, as regards the modalities of the publications.

The following pages illustrate of how the above-mentioned choices can be addressed empirically. This is done by constructing a set of categories from each of the five choices. These categories are approached as *pairs of oppositions* the actors involved in the formulation of quality assurance policy have to choose from[18]. What choices are eventually made is a matter of empirical investigation within each national context.

3.3.1. *Objectives*: What should be the Objectives of the Quality Assurance Policy?

The objectives of quality assurance policy reflect the beliefs about the organisation of the domain. However, trying to wholly uncover the real objectives is a difficult task. Actors are rarely wholly rational and their actions may be motivated by a wide variety of agendas, even if this rationality is sometimes re-constructed *a posteriori*. The consequences for the present study means that attention will mainly be paid to the objectives officially stated and publicly announced for quality assurance. These objectives can be expressed in the form of official statements addressing the role quality assurance can play in the national HE system. The objectives stated for the quality assurance policy can be presented as being of two different kinds: the summative approach and the formative approach[19].

FIGURE 3.1. WHAT ARE THE OBJECTIVES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY?



Summative objectives stress the importance of linking the results obtained through the procedures to some particular consequences. In the field of HE this has taken the shape of subordinating the amount of funds delivered to the universities to how they are able to perform in the evaluation of their activities. The proponents of formative objectives argue that no matter the type of procedures that are introduced, these should by no means influence

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18 The methodological implications of such an approach are discussed in Appendix 1.

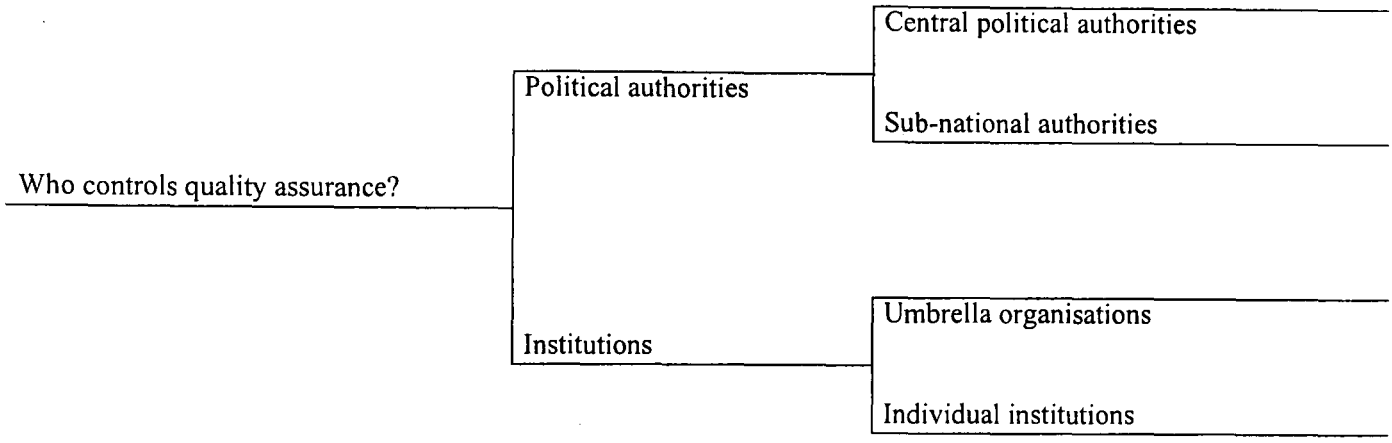
19 The formative/summative distinction comes close to Trow's evaluative vs. supportive procedures (Trow 1994). These differ according to those who benefit from the procedures. According to Trow, evaluative procedures generally tend to be to the advantage of those in charge of the procedures in order either to develop management changes or to provide information upon which political decisions can be made. In contrast, supportive evaluations aim at helping the evaluated units or institutions. These two dimensions need, then, to be combined with the different sources of control in order to construct a four-level typology of quality assurance procedures. Trow's approach has the main advantage of combining the source of control of the procedures with the type of procedures developed. His four-level typology allows for a clearer distinction of different types of quality assurance procedures: internal-supportive; internal evaluative, external supportive and external evaluative (CRE 1997).

the amount of funds institutions receive. Emphasising the learning dimension, they advocate that quality assurance procedures, by means of evaluations or otherwise, have primarily a formative role, i.e. they allow for pointing out weak points of the domain under scrutiny and learning how to improve them.

3.3.2. Control: Who Should be Responsible for Quality Assurance?

Choices about ownership relate to the bodies that should be responsible for the implementation of the policy and to the extent to which this responsibility should be controlled. In the context of the present study, several scenarios can emerge. They would reflect a double theoretical opposition of the following kind:

FIGURE 3.2. WHO CONTROLS THE DOMAIN OF QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY?



The opposition between the political authorities and the HE institutions reflects two different ways of dealing with quality assurance. In theory, one could find a situation where either the political authorities or the HE institutions are solely responsible for the development and implementation of the policy. However, this is unlikely to be found in practical cases. It is much more appropriate to investigate the intermediary arrangements between these two extremes, i.e. mixed political and institutional control of the procedures.

The discussion of the opposition *within* the two levels mentioned above needs to be done in two stages. As regards the political authorities, a distinction has to be drawn between central and regional governments. As regards the opposition within the institutions, the focus should be on the way the HE sectors deal with quality assurance. Are the institutions' umbrella organisations playing a predominant role in the procedures or is this the responsibility of the individual institutions?

Finally, attention will also have to be paid to the autonomy enjoyed by those responsible for the procedures of quality assurance. This point is important. For practical reasons, it will be addressed only through the angle of independence from the political authorities. In effect, the independence of the agencies responsible for quality assurance is generally seen as a supplementary security for the validity of the entire process.

3.3.3. *Areas*: What are the Areas Covered by the Quality Assurance Procedures?

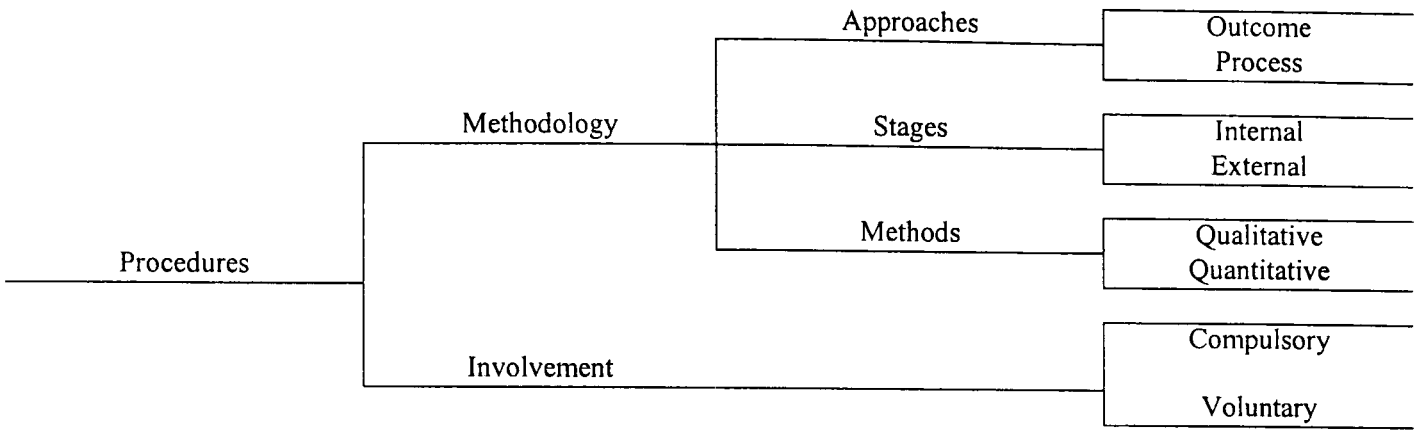
When it comes to deciding upon the areas covered by quality assurance, three categories can be defined: research, teaching/learning and overall institutional management. The first two address the traditional missions of HE institutions, whereas the third encompasses the broader activities of these institutions such as the proper use of financial subsidies or the type of institutional government. While pointing out the areas where quality assurance procedures exist, the country reports will not enter a thorough discussion of every domain. Attention will be paid principally to the area of teaching/learning. Quality assurance of research will not be considered in itself mainly because of the different nature compared to teaching. Similarities, however, exist between the two. These refer principally to the methods used in the procedures, which combine quantitative and qualitative approaches. The types of methods used can be further addressed by looking at how quality assurance procedures are organised. Let us elaborate on this dimension.

3.3.4. *Procedures*: How are the Quality Assurance Procedures Set Up?

Addressing the choice of methods means entering the exclusive area of the policy instruments. This is the moment when policy beliefs are translated into practice. This process can be looked into at two different levels. The first refers to methodological questions, which have to be addressed in three different ways; the second is the degree of involvement requested from the institutions. Figure 3.3 can help visualise the discussion.

As regards methodological issues, the areas that need to be investigated can be summarised in three pairs of oppositions: outcome-oriented vs. process-oriented procedures; internal vs. external procedures and qualitative vs. quantitative methods.

FIGURE 3.3. SETTING UP OF QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES



The first opposition emphasises two different approaches to quality assurance procedures. Depending on the domain where they are implemented, outcome-oriented procedures aim at answering the question, "How good is the product delivered by the institution?" As such, this is a difficult point to make. It directly raises the concomitant question of defining what "good" is and how it should be measured. Outcome-oriented procedures are based on two assumptions. The first is that there is an objective "product" that comes out of HE institutions, such as numbers of graduates or publications. The second assumption is that these outcomes can be assessed against a number of predefined criteria and standards[20]. In contrast to outcome-oriented procedures, process oriented ones do not have as a prime objective the measurement of a supposed product. In this case, emphasis is on the general process through which education is delivered and/or research carried out in the different institutions.

The second pair of oppositions, i.e. internal vs. external procedures, focuses on the different stages of the procedures as well as on the actors involved in these stages. In this case, attention can be paid to the presence or absence of a combination of internal and external reviews as well as to the organisation of these two phases. The principle of the internal procedures relies on the draft of self-assessment reports. These reports are usually prepared on the basis of guidelines defined by the body responsible for the whole process of quality assurance. In contrast, the external procedures rely on the involvement of peer reviewers commenting on the different element of the procedures.

The third pair of oppositions, the quantitative/qualitative distinction, can be re-formulated to highlight two widely used methods to assess quality in HE: the use of performance indicators (PIs) and the use of peer reviews. More than opposed methods, they can be seen as

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[20] These types of procedures are currently implemented in some Nordic countries such as Norway (Stensaker 1998) and Denmark and, as will be further elaborated below, England.

complementary ones. PIs do not have a strict and ultimate definition (Cave *et al.* 1988; Harris and Dochy 1990; Yorke 1991). They can be strictly quantitative or qualitative, although more emphasis is generally put on the quantifiable information they can provide. According to van Vught and Westerheijden (1993: Appendix 2), PIs provide clear, objective and measurable information, thus offering large inter-subjectivity, and can serve as a solid basis for political decisions. This point links together the development of quality assurance procedures with the objectives stated. However, there are also some problems in the use of PIs. The first is the pertinence of such indicators in the field of HE and, implicitly, in education itself. Another problem concerns the actual comparability of the data collected, which sometimes makes it difficult to undertake valid comparisons.

Alongside the methodological issues, addressing the *how* question also implies making a decision as regards whether taking part in the quality assurance procedures is compulsory or whether HE institutions can refuse to engage in these processes. This issue can be addressed by looking at regulations and guidelines and the incentives used by people in charge of the procedures to get the institutions involved.

3.3.5. *Uses*: How is the Information Collected Used?

What to do with the information gathered during the procedures is the fifth fundamental choice to be made in the domain of quality assurance policy. In this case, the use would reflect previous decisions regarding the *objectives* and the *control* of the system. It would also reflect broader policy orientations observable in other domains of public activity.

Different responses can be provided. On the one hand, the information collected can be made available not only to the institutions that have been assessed but also to broader sectors of society. On the other hand, the information can also be used to rank the units assessed according to their results. This way of dealing with the information collected is becoming more and more common. League tables and rankings are established in several countries and widely published in books, newspapers and magazines (Yorke 1998; 2001). They are seen as a means of allowing students, parents and other interested actors to select the best place for their HE.

Whereas this first point emphasises the social use of the information collected, the second dimension to be looked into refers to the political use. This implies an investigation into the relationships between the information collected and policies developed on the basis of this

information. From this perspective, one could analyse whether the procedures of quality assurance have consequences on, for instance, the amount of funds the institutions received from the political authorities or the management of the institutions.

3.4. Emergence and Construction: Quality Assurance in Motion

In order to address how the issue of quality assurance develops within a given national context, the study distinguishes between the emergence of quality as a political issue and the translation of this debate into a set of systemised policies through the actualisation of the fundamental policy choices

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The first dimension addresses the world of ideas and discourses about quality in HE and how, at a particular moment of time, they take hold on existing conditions to gain force and influence as political issues. This does not mean that prior to that moment nothing was being done about it. Rather, arguing that quality becomes a political issue means that it gains political relevance and becomes a matter of public debate. What might have been previously a matter of internal institutional management now appears as an element sensitive enough to be brought under public light. The second dimension concentrates on the process through which concerns for quality in HE are progressively structured into practices and procedures. It addresses the process through which the fundamental choices related to quality assurance in HE are actualised in a set of systematised policies.

This distinction echoes the theoretical discussion of chapter 2. It allows us to address quality assurance policy in a dynamic way. Empirically, it implies attention be paid to two different elements. First, addressing the emergence of quality as a political issue requires concentrating on the context and the reasons put forward to legitimate the development of some type of structured policies. In terms of policy paradigms, this stage can be considered as a challenge to the traditional policies implemented in the domain of quality assurance[21]. Second, addressing the construction of a systematised set of policies for quality assurance in HE implies an interrogation of the reasons why the fundamental policy choices have been addressed in the way they have been. The objective underpinning this distinction is to point

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[21] The crisis can be observed through a reconsideration of the traditional instruments used to ensure quality or the organisation of the procedures in terms of the methods used. A modification of the beliefs that underpinned the traditional policy instruments occurs concomitantly. This may, for instance, be the case for the role of the political authorities in the domain of quality assurance policy.

out the similarities and differences in the national policies for quality assurance and, eventually, to assess whether and to what extent cross-national policy convergence has taken place. By so doing, it becomes possible to identify the factors at play in the two processes and to analyse how they configure to shape the policies for quality assurance currently observable in the four countries. This is done by resorting to the theoretical tools displayed earlier and by reconstructing the process through which a common issue, i.e. quality assurance in HE, has emerged and been shaped in a particular country.

This process reflects the configuration of a number of factors. These originate either from inside or outside the national context and from within or outside the national HE system. This study considers the latter as the most important level of analysis inasmuch as it is within boundaries of the national HE system that quality assurance policies have to make sense. By displaying these different factors within the distinction sketched above - the emergence of quality as a political issue and its translation into a set of systematised policies – the following combinations are obtained.

FIGURE 3.4. POTENTIAL FACTORS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THEORETICAL COMBINATIONS

Factors at play in the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue			**Factors at play in the construction of the quality assurance policy domain**		
	National	International		National	International
Internal	Factors I	Factors II	Internal	Factors V	Factors VI
External	Factors III	Factors IV	External	Factors VII	Factors VIII

These combinations form the frame within which the comparative discussion will be structured in chapter 9 when assessing whether and to what extent cross-national policy convergence is taking place. For the time being, the following paragraphs discuss the nature of these factors and their implications for the present study.

3.4.1. Factors at Play in the Emergence of Quality Assurance as a Political Issue

The emergence of the quality debate as a political issue at national level can be seen as the result of several factors originating from various sources. On the one hand, the factors can be *internal* or *external* to the national HE system. On the other hand, they can originate either

from *within* or *outside* the national context. The following paragraphs look into the nature of these factors. They first address the internal factors before turning to the external ones.

In the first case, the emergence of the quality debate as a political issue reflects transformations internal to the national HE system. These transformations can be qualitative and/or quantitative and are the result of national trends, although similar trends can be observed in other countries. What are the transformations of the systems of HE that can be at play in the emergence of the quality debate? The first is the *numerical expansion*, a trend generally referred to as massification. As noted, this trend can be observed in most western countries, although the period during which it takes place as well as its extent often differ from place to place. The reason why massification is seen as a key element in the emergence of the quality debate is because the shift from elite to mass HE is characterised by the entrance of traditionally excluded social categories. This results in new and differentiated demands on the HE systems but also on a differentiation of standards and subsequent fears that these may fall, especially if the expansion is accompanied by a decline in funding.

The emergence of the quality debate can also be considered to be the result of political concerns regarding the level of students' achievement and the time they take to complete their studies. This constitutes a second category of the internal-national dimension of the factors at play and can be analysed through the *level of dropouts*. The extent to which the dropout rate is related to the massification of HE is difficult to determine precisely. What is less doubtful, however, is the fact that these two factors are often brought forward as central elements in the debates on quality assurance in HE.

Finally, a third internal factor worth looking into is the role of *institutional bodies and professional associations* at the national level. Institutional bodies, such as the associations of HE institutions, or rectors' associations, can play a role in launching the debate on quality, although their role may be more important in shaping and organising the operationalisation of the procedures as further discussed below.

The emergence of the quality debate as a political issue can also be influenced by factors originating outside the national HE system. It can, for instance, be related to *general policy orientations* advocated by the political authorities. In this case, HE, as a policy domain, is affected by the transformations that impact upon other sectors of public activity such as the health service or public transport, for instance. Consequently, policies devised for HE and

quality assurance reflect broader societal and political trends, while at the same time mirroring the peculiarities of the national HE system.

Among the general policies that can most affect the emergence of the quality debate, two seem particularly important. The first is the extent to which there is a *reduction of financial support* from the political authorities. As a matter of fact, the financial argument has been used as a key lever in the transformations experienced by the HE systems of most western countries and beyond. However, like the process of massification, the extent and timing of budget-cuts can differ from one place to another. An important aspect of the reduction of funds is the influence of what is generally referred to as "marketisation of HE" (Higher Education Policy 1997). When implemented as part of a broader policy, the marketisation of HE can have direct consequences on the process of quality assurance. The process of marketisation in HE encompasses an objective and a subjective dimension. The objective dimension is best characterised by the already mentioned diversification of financial resources and the parallel setting up of a *market* for HE. This has also influenced the internal structures of management of the institutions, making the entrepreneurial model the dominant organisational type of institutional governance. In parallel, the marketisation of HE also encompasses a subjective dimension. This refers to the changing perception of the idea of university and the ways of behaving in it. The introduction of the entrepreneurial model in the institutions of HE is one of the most important characteristics. In this context, academics are more and more requested to act and behave as if the HE institutions were private companies providing a particular product, education and/or research to different types of clients, i.e. students, public and private collectivities etc. In such a context, quality assurance procedures can be part of the ways through which funds are allocated to the different institutions. In addition, in a context characterised by a strong competition for research funds and/or students among the institutions, the development of quality assurance can also be understood as a means of providing the potential *users* of universities' services with the information needed to make a rational choice. However, as these two example tend to demonstrate, it is not the existence of quality assurance procedures that are of interest in the context of the marketisation of HE but much more the use of the information collected during these procedures. This point is important. It once again stresses the close interconnectedness of quality assurance procedures with the other policies developed in the field. It allows for scrutiny of the consistency of the different sections that, put together, constitute the national

policy for HE. Although being somewhat in between the internal and external factors, it is analysed as an external factor because it originates outside the HE system itself.
The second factor is more general. It relates to *variations in the role or place of the state* in the management of public activities and the struggles between the different political levels having prerogatives in the formulation of HE policy, which is generally the case in de-centralised political systems.

The emergence of the quality debate in a particular country can also be influenced by international factors. Within the domain of HE, the role of international *professional bodies and associations* as catalysts of the quality debate in a particular country is important to assess. Like their national counterparts, they can be seen as places where ideas and impressions are shared and from which lessons can be learnt from international partners. Professional bodies and associations are not the only factors potentially influencing the emergence of the quality debate. The process of the *internationalisation of HE policy* can also be at play. The latter can influence, among other things, student exchanges, through international schemes, and the conditions to be met if a particular country wishes to comply with regulations passed by non-national bodies.

The last category of factors relates to those originating outside the national context and that are external to the domain of HE itself. Here, the emergence of the quality debate can be analysed in relation to the increasing importance of supra-national institutions and the type of relationships individual countries have with them. In this case, the *role of the European Union* (EU) deserves some attention inasmuch as it can be seen as a place where decisions are taken regarding the organisation of policy domains, among which is HE. Although these decisions do not bind the different Member States, they do have substantial impact on policy-making at national level. In addition, the EU is also a producer of international projects on quality assurance in HE involving several Member States.

3.4.2. Factors at Play in the Construction of the Quality Assurance Policy Domain

The previous section has looked at the emergence of quality in HE as a political issue. It has pointed out a number of key factors whose empirical relevance will be determined in the four case studies. The following paragraphs prolong the discussion by turning to the process through which the debates are translated into policies in the domain of quality assurance. In

this sense, the discussion points out the factors potentially involved in the actualisation of the fundamental choices.

The discussion begins with the factors at play inside the system of HE at the national level. Here, three elements can be of relevance: a) *the organisational features of national systems of HE*; b) *the governance of HE in general, and quality assurance in particular, as policy domains*; and c) the *role of the institutional bodies and professional associations*.

The *organisational features of national systems of HE* are an important factor in the actualisation of the fundamental choices in quality assurance inasmuch as the policies that will be formulated will have to address the particularities of the system within which they are implemented[22]. Consequently, those systems based on a binary divide (Davies 1992) would dispose of differentiated types of policies for quality assurance. Differences would not only reflect variations in the type of education provided but also in the origins of the binary divide and in the type of relationship each sector has with the political authorities.

Alongside the organisational features within which they make sense, the policies for quality assurance have to be located within the broader set of policies formulated for the whole HE policy domain. This point relates to a second important factor in the actualisation of the fundamental choices: *the governance* of HE in general, and quality assurance in particular, as policy domains. This factor can be addressed in three ways. First is the question of who decides HE policies and, in particular, policies related to quality assurance. Three possibilities can emerge: the central government of the country under investigation, the regional governments, or the HE institutions themselves. Second is the way a decision is taken regarding HE and quality assurance. Here, the focus turns to the degree of diffusion or centralisation of power in the two policy domains. Third is the question of what is decided regarding quality assurance between the different actors involved. Altogether, the analysis of the structure of HE policy offers an insight into the type of relationships between the HE

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[22] The relationship between the system of HE and the type of policies formulated in the domain of quality assurance has been addressed by, among others, Brennan *et al.* (*Eds* 1992) and van Vught and Westerheijden (1993). These authors refer to "two traditions" of quality assurance echoing two different types of organising HE. These two traditions are the continental model, on the one hand, and the English model on the other. The continental model is founded upon the strong influence of state bureaucracies and administrations on academic affairs, in particular regarding the conditions of entrance (through state defined examinations), process and output control. In contrast, the English tradition has historically been based on far less involvement of the political authorities. This situation was characterised by institutions being granted Charters assuring their autonomy in the selection of students, the award of degrees and the

institutions and the political authorities, on the one side, and between the different levels of government, on the other. This is based on the assumption that the actualisation of the fundamental choices does not only reflect forms of political control of HE but also forms of power distribution between levels of government on a given territory.

Together with the organisation of the systems of HE and their overall governance, a third internal factor can potentially be influential in the formulation of quality assurance policies: the *institutional bodies and professional associations*. Their influence on the actualisation of the fundamental choices would reflect the general organisation of the domain as well as their respective influence in it.

As regards national factors at play outside the domain of HE, *political features* are important dimensions[23]. This requires a consideration of the formal political framework of a country as a configuration of constraints and opportunities in the formulation of public policies. In this case, the emphasis is on the *political organisation of the national territory* and how it influences the organisation of policy domains. Attention has to be paid to the degree of political devolution to sub-national entities and the concomitant prerogatives as regards the formulation of public policies having statutory power over the sub-national territory[24].

Empirically, these two dimensions – i.e. national political institutions and political organisation of the national territory - can hardly be separated inasmuch as the political organisation of the territory largely determines the type of political institutions. For instance,

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development of the curricula. Control procedures tended to be limited to external examiners (output control), complemented in some fields of study with professional licensing and/or accreditation.

23 Acknowledging the influence of political structures, as this implies, leads towards more classical theories in political sciences, e.g. new institutionalism. Among the different competing varieties of new institutionalisms (Hall and Taylor 1996, Kato 1996, Peters 1999), the historical variant fits particularly well with the approach developed in the previous pages. In effect, historical new institutionalists (Hall 1986, Steinmo *et al. Eds* 1992) acknowledge the necessity of differentiating between informal and formal constraints. Such a distinction allows linking together the ideational approach as discussed above and the influence of political institutions. In addition, the proponents of historical new institutionalism also recognise the necessity to take former policies into account if one aims at providing a clear picture of the context within which reforms are implemented and the "problem" they tend to solve is understood. Embedded in particular legacies, cross-national differences could therefore be understood as a result of the meaning given to the problems as much as of the influence of different national institutional features.
What are the types of political institutions that need to be taken into account? Generally, historical new institutionalism tends "to link institutions to organisations and norms or conventions edicted by formal organisations" (Hall and Taylor 1996: 471). From this perspective, institutions are seen as official and unofficial procedures, protocols, norms and conventions inherent to the structure of the political community. A more useful definition is provided by Thelen and Steinmo who see institutions as either formal government structures, legal or social institutions (Thelen and Steinmo 1992: 2-4). It is this view that will be followed in the empirical studies.

24 As a matter of fact, governmental features, the fragmentation of power, the presence of institutionalised veto-points and the structure of the decision-making process are dimensions that can influence the way actors actualise the fundamental choices and turn them into policies.

federal systems would tend to have a greater diffusion of power over the national territory, thus granting (some) autonomy to the sub-national level in the formulation and/or implementation of public policies.

International factors are also at play in the formulation of national policies for quality assurance. Here the same factors as those discussed in the previous sections can be seen as potentially influential.

As regards the factors from within HE, two are of substantial importance. The first, as noted, refers to the *institutional bodies and professional associations* and is similar to what has been presented above when discussing the emergence of the quality debate, although their role may be more important here. Professional associations and networks such as the International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (INQAHE) or the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) are places where discussions are held among actors holding key positions at national level. Experiences are exchanged and ideas debated; new impressions can arise and alternatives emerge. How much and in what way these international networks influence the formulation of national policies is an issue that cannot be fully addressed without unbalancing the entire study. However, in some cases, the influence of international academic communities can be spotted in the discussions that have surrounded the formulation of quality assurance policies. The country reports will look into them.

The second dimension that can be looked at is the *internationalisation of HE policy*. This trend has gained increasing importance and will continue to do so in the coming years. It can influence national policy on quality assurance because it heralds the emergence of the global village and the freedom of movement of individuals. The Bologna Declaration, for instance, can deeply impact on the signatory countries not only because they would work towards the unification of their national curricula but also because this unification will allow students to study abroad, thus requiring harmonisation of the instruments through which standards can be assured.

As regards the international factors at play outside the domain of HE, it is important to take into consideration the *role of supra-national institutions like the European Union* (EU). As noted earlier, the EU is not only a place of policy production but also a place where projects on quality assurance are undertaken.

Sections 3.2 and 3.3 have discussed the factors potentially at play in the emergence of the quality debate as a political issue, and the construction of the policy domain. Figure 3.5 offers an overview of the combination of the different factors.

FIGURE 3.5. POTENTIAL FACTORS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EMPIRICAL EXAMPLES

Factors at play in the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue			**Factors at play in the construction of the quality assurance policy domain**		
	National	International		National	International
Internal	• Expansion • Drop outs • Institutional bodies and professional associations	• Institutional bodies and professional associations • Internationalisation of HE policy	Internal	• Organisational features of national HE systems • Governance of HE and quality assurance as policy domains • Institutional bodies and professional associations	• Institutional bodies and professional associations • Internationalisation of HE policy
External	• General policy orientations • reduction of financial support • Changing role and/or place of the state.	• Supra-national institutions: the European Union	External	• Political features • Political organisation of the national territory	• Supra-national institutions: the European Union.

3.5. Summary and Conclusions

This chapter has discussed how the theoretical elements discussed in chapter 2 can be adapted to cross-national comparisons of quality assurance policies. The first stage was the identification of the fundamental choices in the domain of quality assurance. As argued, these are choices the political authorities have to address in one way or another, independently of the moment or the place. As such, they constitute a-temporal and a-spatial categories that have to be actualised into policies. It is this process of actualisation that needs to be investigated in order to compare how different national environments make sense of the fundamental features and, consequently, to assess whether and to what extent, they tend to converge.

The empirical studies have been bounded both temporally and as regards the elements to be looked at. This has been done by resorting to two strategies. The first has been to distinguish between the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue, on the one hand, and the shape taken by quality assurance policies as currently observable on the other. This distinction permits us to locate the moment of departure of the investigation in the present time and to limit the study of the policy to the moment when it became politically sensitive. This point is related to more methodological issues regarding diachronic and synchronic

stages of the research that are dealt with extensively in chapter 4. The second strategy used to limit the extent of the research has been, first, to provide potential responses to the fundamental choices in the domain of quality assurance policy and, second, to identify a number of factors at play in the two phases. By looking at how they actually influence the emergence of the quality debate or the formulation of the policies, they can provide some understanding of the reasons why national polices are, or not, converging and to what extent they do so. In this sense, the study argues that reasons for cross-national differences and/or similarities can only be found in the particular configuration of the factors at play in the construction of the quality assurance policy domain in each country. It is the history of this particular configuration that provides if not a definite answer, at least a fruitful insight into the impact of the national variable in the shaping of policies.

Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1. Introduction

The present chapter addresses the methodological aspects of the study[25]. It begins with a discussion of the research paradigm and the epistemological standpoints adopted. Then, section 4.3 turns to concerns regarding the case studies and their selection, as well as the comparative approach developed in the study. Here, the distinction between synchronic and diachronic approaches is addressed and their relevance for comparative purposes assessed. Section 4.4 then discusses the methods of data collection and some of the issues regarding the overall validity of the study and the ethical issues that have emerged. Section 4.5 concludes this chapter with a summary of the main elements discussed and the standpoints adopted.

4.2. The Research Paradigm

Every research project is undertaken with a number of assumptions about the nature of the object under investigation, how it can be addressed and how the information collected can best be transmitted to potential readers. The extent to which these preconceptions are made explicit to those readers, however, varies from case to case. The author of the present study believes that explicating one's ontological and epistemological standpoints constitutes a central part of the research process permitting one to locate oneself – and to be located by others – within a particular research community organised around a given research paradigm (Scott D. 1995). In the literature, two research paradigms are generally distinguished: the normative and the interpretive or naturalistic (Cohen *et al.* 2000: 22; Guba and Lincoln 1994; Hitchcock and Hughes 1995: 21; Husén 1999). These two paradigms best characterise the different ways of addressing ontological and epistemological issues in the social sciences.

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[25] The construction of a methodological framework is a crucial stage in the research process. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995: 19-21) consider that the formulation of a research methodology stems from the responses provided to three questions. The first relates to *ontological* issues, i.e. issues about the nature of the social world and the phenomenon under investigation. The response to this question frames the *epistemology* of the research, i.e. the beliefs regarding the nature of knowledge, its acquaintance and actual transmission. The response to this other question has, then, *methodological* implications as regards the techniques to be used in the process of data collection and the type of data to be collected. Such an approach reaffirms the

The normative paradigm shares many similarities with experimental research designs inasmuch as it adopts the positivist view that reality is transparent and can be directly addressed, investigated and understood. Proponents of the experimental research design in the social sciences have attempted to emulate the modes of inquiry of the natural sciences. They have tried to expand the belief that universal laws govern human behaviour and social phenomena, and that it is possible to identify regularities in this human behaviour (Cohen *et al.* 2000: 19). They also assume that a manipulation of the variables under consideration is possible and that a decisive control can be exercised over the entire research process. In this sense, the normative/experimental paradigm implies the possibility of extracting a set of explanatory variables and variables to be explained and doing that within a hypothetico-deductive framework based on causal relationships (Merriam 1988: 6).

Reaction to positivism and scientism in the social sciences has coalesced around the non-experimental paradigm or naturalistic inquiry. This notion was first used by Guba and was seen as a competitor to "conventional inquiry" (Guba 1978: 11), then characterised by the experimental/positivist model. This notion has been further developed to become a "postpositivist paradigm" (Lincoln and Guba 1984: 36). It shares, and somewhat encompasses, views of qualitative approaches mainly because it does not address issues of variables and measurement[26]. The schools of thought that have opposed the positivist approach to social reality share the belief that it is not possible to look at social phenomena from the outside as pure and inanimate objects. Rather, an understanding of the social world can only be obtained by integrating the perspective of the actors that are part of the phenomena under investigation. In addition, they also oppose the assumption of a fully objective researcher detached from her/his object of study. In contrast, the researcher is considered to be part of the research process.

Because the use of a pure experimental design in the social sciences is not possible, due to the impossibility of tightly controlling all the variables, quasi-experimental research designs have been developed and used as approximations of the experimental model (Merriam 1998:

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importance of a clear exposition of the researcher's methodological standpoint towards his/her object as an essential part of the research process itself and not as a mere "technical exercise" (Cohen *et al.* 2000: 4).

[26] An important element to be kept in mind is that qualitative investigation is just one of the characteristics of the interpretive/naturalistic/anti-positivistic research paradigm. As put by Tesch: "From a definitional point of view it does, in fact, make more sense to say that using qualitative methods is a way of doing naturalistic inquiry, rather than to say that using naturalistic inquiry is a way of doing qualitative research" (Tesch 1990: 44).

7). In comparative studies, other quasi-experimental designs develop causal relationships on an *ex post* basis. In this case, the researcher investigates the causes that provoked a given effect. Quasi-experimental designs of this second type have been used in comparative HE studies (Goedegebuure and van Vught *Eds* 1994) and are often inspired by the work of John Stuart Mill (1865). These are related to the positivist approach of comparative studies where causal hypotheses are formulated and subsequently tested on different domains[27]. The present study takes the counterpoint of these positivistic approaches and elaborates on a non-experimental/interpretive research design whose main concern is the construction of a contextualised narrative. The epistemological position defended here departs from the assumption underpinning causalistic approaches to social research, namely that it is possible to extract a number of potential elements that can explain why the policy output in a given national environment is what it is. By contrast, the non-experimental research design developed here is based on the determination of a number of factors that can potentially affect the emergence of quality as a political issue and the formulation of quality assurance policy. The difference between this research design and a more (quasi)-experimental one resides in the articulation of the factors. Whereas positivistic approaches would link characteristics of these factors to characteristics of the policy outcome, the present study proposes to talk about configurations of factors. It engages in a narrative form of discovery to investigate whether and how these factors configure in each country to address the fundamental policy choices and particular forms of quality assurance policies.

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[27] This type of study aims at providing a clear explanation of the phenomena under investigation by hypothesising a direct link between two factors. Causal comparisons therefore attempt to reproduce in the social sciences the model of natural experimentation. Mill's method of agreement and indirect method of difference (Mill 1865) constitute the prime reference of those searching for causal explanations. Goedegebuure and van Vught describe as follows the type of approach Mill's method implies for studies into HE: "(...) a truly causal comparative study would have to begin with the specification of the hypothesis to be tested (...). The next step would be an overview of possible competing explanations, which would be followed by a clear specification of the cases and of the variables to be analysed in these cases. In causal comparative study the specification of both positive and negative cases is crucial. The theoretical framework would have to provide indications for such a specification; if no framework is available, a causal analysis cannot be performed" (Goedegebuure and van Vught 1994: 19). The contribution by Goedegebuure and van Vught is a major attempt to extend the use of experimental models in this particular field. Their collective work "Comparative Policy Studies" provides a number of theoretically founded causal analyses of different facets of HE policy (Huisman and Jenniskens 1994; Frederiks *et al.* 1994b). Behind this attempt lies a concern for theory building. Kogan (1996) strongly questions the pertinence of such a method, mainly for its inadequacy in taking into account the particularities that can be found in the countries compared.
Moreover, when dealing with comparative studies concentrating on a limited number of units, as is generally the case, the use of Mill's methods is based on a number of assumptions that can not easily be defended: (a) they suppose deterministic causes; (b) they assume no measurement errors; (c) they assume monocausality; (d) they do not address the interaction effects (Lieberson 1994: 1225).

4.3. The Case Studies

The construction of a case-study constitutes a particular technique of addressing social reality equipped with specific tools. Robson (1993) considers the case-study as:

> "a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon with its real life context using multiple sources of evidence."
>
> Robson 1993: 143

Robson's approach fits well with the research paradigm adopted in the present study inasmuch as it stresses the particularity of case-study as a method, namely that the phenomenon under investigation can be fully understood only within its context and through the adoption of non-dogmatic views as regards the techniques for data collection. This view rejects any (quasi)-positivist approach to case-studies of the kind promoted by Yin (1993) when he argues that case-studies are:

> "an appropriate research method when [one is] trying to attribute causal relationships – and not just wanting to explore or describe a situation."
>
> Yin 1993: 31

The case-study is more than a residual method to be used when "scientific" ones have failed or proved unworkable, as Yin suggests (1993: 31). It is precisely because social reality cannot be adequately approached with an experimental design, or any of its softer derivations, that case-studies are a suitable tool for social scientists.

Because of the comparative framework that is developed, the empirical work of this study combines aspects of the case-study method with tools borrowed from historical research. Discussing these two approaches, Yin (1989: 19-20) draws a dividing line between what belongs to the historian and what refers to the case-studies. Historians deal with the "dead past", characterised by the impossibility of accessing the actors that were involved in the events investigated. In contrast, case-studies address current situations characterised by direct accessibility to the object investigated and the actors involved. According to the foregoing, this study distinguishes between what is currently observable in the domain of quality assurance in HE and the historical process that has led to the present situation. Such a distinction requires the use of different types of concepts: concepts accounting for the observation of the current situation on the one hand, and concepts allowing for the reconstruction of the process that has led to this current situation on the other hand. In terms

of Yin's distinction, the case-study approach would refer to the synchronic analysis, whereas the historical approach would be used in the process of reconstruction[28].

To sum up, the case-study can be seen as a relevant method to account for both the present and the past. Its territory goes beyond the boundaries of time and directly accessible events, thus forming an articulated and coherent "architectural blueprint" (Merriam 1988: 6) allowing for a consistent assemblage and display of the information collected.

4.3.1. Selecting the Case and the Context to Study It

The selection of a case and an environment within which to study it are crucial stages of the research process. Working within a non-experimental research paradigm requires a solid justification of the reasons that have led the researcher to choose a particular case and to analyse it in a given context. By clearly explicating the reasons behind these choices, the researcher increases her/his chances to see the conclusions of her/his investigation being generalisable beyond the selected geographical boundaries or policy domains.

As noted earlier, the issue of quality assurance in HE has become a cause of concern worldwide, often alongside more comprehensive redefinitions of the HE landscape as a whole. Because it encompasses debates that have been taking place in other aspects of HE policy (funding and internal governance, for instance), the study of the structure of quality assurance as a policy domain can be of interest. In addition, the domains of quality are generally structured to fit into the national HE system. Comparatively, thus, addressing how different countries have addressed a similar issue can also be of interest. For that purpose, the selection of the context within which the domains of quality assurance policy are studied is

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[28] Although interesting, Yin's distinction cannot be fully applied here. In effect, the contemporary nature of the phenomenon under investigation does not reduce the pertinence of the distinction between moment and process although it limits the relevance of the past/present distinction as regards the research design. It does so inasmuch as the techniques of data collection start to overlap. Something that Yin considers impossible for the historian – conducting interviews with key actors, for instance – is possible in this study because of the short distance in time that separates the present author from the actors that were immersed in the formulation and implementation of quality assurance policy in the mid- and late 1980s. As regards the two principal techniques of data collection used in this study, this point can be made more explicit by the following examples. The construction of the existing situation can be done through the use of primary and secondary sources and the conduction of interviews with people involved in quality assurance. But these two methods can also be used in the process of reconstruction. Documentary sources allow for a better understanding of the stages that have led to the existing situation and for the identification of the ideational substractum. In addition, because the phenomenon under investigation is recent, interviews can also be conducted with people that were involved in the very beginnings of quality assurance policy in the different countries.

crucial. In this perspective, the present study analyses the domain of quality assurance policy by focusing on four European countries: England, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland. The reasons guiding this choice are both intellectual and personal. The latter are certainly less relevant, although nonetheless pertinent when it comes to analysing official documents. As the study partially relies on documentary evidence, the author's knowledge of three out of the four languages spoken in the countries covered is a decisive advantage. Personal interest also relates to earlier studies into the state-of-the-art of the quality of teaching in Swiss HE, where this author compared the situation in Switzerland with other countries, especially in the England and the Netherlands (Perellon *et al.* 1999; Fischer *et al.* 1998). The review of the literature revealed that these two countries had for many years been developing their own instruments for quality assurance in teaching and research. However, differences were discernible as regards the actors involved in quality assurance policy, the type of instruments developed and the use of the information collected. Compared to these two cases, Switzerland appeared both as a latter comer and a more prudent case. *Why*?

The Spanish case was included because of the peculiar nature of the HE system and the changes in the domain of quality assurance since the 1990s. Concerns for quality assurance were observable in the 1983 *Ley de Reforma universitaria*. Individuals' research activity began to be assessed in the mid-1980s but at the institutional level only occurred from the early 1990s onwards. Like England and the Netherlands, but in contrast to Switzerland, a central agency was charged with developing some kind of quality control of the institutions.

To summarise, the origins of the present study rest in the desire to understand the differences among countries dealing with similar problems and challenges. If the debates on the future of HE in the four countries offered a large number of similarities, the policies effectively implemented in the domain of quality assurance seemed to be different. In a context characterised by inter-national concerns for co-ordination, it seemed an interesting issue to investigate.

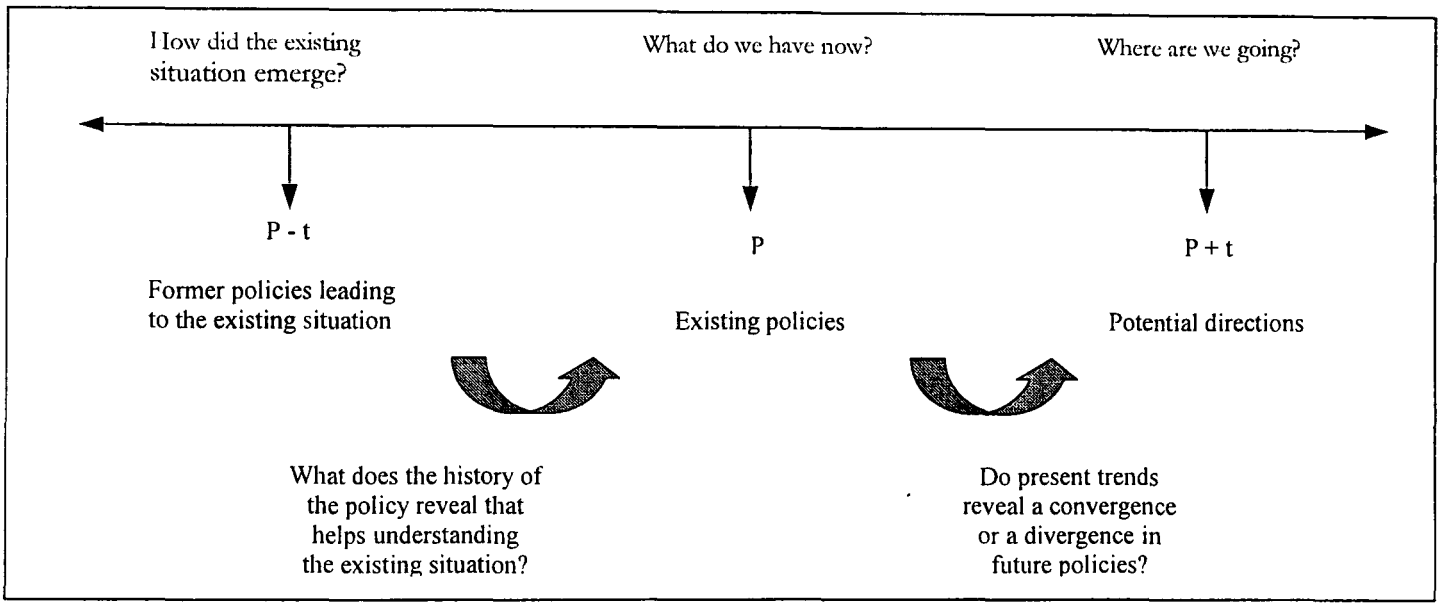
4.3.2. The Method of Comparative Analysis

Following the theoretical discussions of chapters 2 and 3, such a task requires an accurate inquiry into the existing situations and the process through which they have come to be what they are. This is not an easy task. The comparative concern together with the approach adopted for the study of policy convergence (section 2.3) make it even more difficult

inasmuch as they imply the development of a comparative method able to account not only for different national realities but also for different levels of analysis.

For that purpose, the distinction between diachronic and synchronic perspectives can prove helpful because it permits two different analytical levels to be addressed, i.e. process and moment. Far from being irreconcilable, these dimensions should be understood as two stages of the same intellectual effort. The synchronic perspective provides the starting point for the enquiry, whereas the diachronic perspective permits the reconstruction of the process through which current situations have come to be what they are and gives room for the identification of future orientations. The comparative approach used in this study can be sketched out as follows:

FIGURE 4.1. SCHEMATIC OUTLINE OF THE STUDY



The first stage, summarised as P (for *present*), refers to the present situation regarding quality assurance policy in the four countries. It implies an accurate description of the structure of the policy domains in terms of their ideational and material dimensions. This first stage of the analysis offers a static image of the organisation of the policy domain in the four countries, thus providing a first insight into cross-national differences and/or similarities. The second stage, summarised as P - t (t for *time*), analyses the emergence of the existing structure of the policy domain previously observed and described. Here, the focus turns to the origins of the present situation in each country, the stages they have gone through and the influence of the different factors potentially at play in the construction of the policy domain. This second stage provides a mobile counterpart to the static description. Finally, the third stage, P + t,

relates to potential future directions among the policy domains of the four countries. Here, it is the knowledge acquired from the study of the past that informs the researcher about future trends.

Consequently, the synchronic/diachronic approach accounts for two different analytical stages. A distinction must be drawn between notions referring to a process and those referring to a particular moment. This point is particularly important as a consequence of the way the notion of policy convergence was addressed in chapter 2. There, it was pointed out that this notion refers to the process of two – or more – elements *becoming* more similar and, as such, should be distinguished from two – or more - elements *being* more similar at a given moment of time. In addition, for comparative purposes, it also gained from being analysed alongside its immediate counterpart, i.e. divergence, to which the same argument applies. These remarks echo the distinction between the synchronic and diachronic approach and permit further discussion of the notions that will be used in the country reports and the analysis.

As regards synchronic notions, the empirical studies focus on differences and similarities. As regards diachronic notions, attention is paid to divergence and convergence. Figure 4.2 below outlines the differences that need to be kept in mind when comparing policies. It should be seen as a conceptual complement to the methodological outline sketched in Figure 4.1. It provides a clearer image of how the analysis of a particular moment can be combined with that of the process.

FIGURE 4.2. DIACHRONIC AND SYNCHRONIC CONCEPTS AND THEIR ANTONYMS

Synchronic	Diachronic	Synchronic	Diachronic	Synchronic
What did we have?	*How did we get here?*	*What do we have?*	*Where are we going?*	*What will we have?*
Differences/ Similarities	Convergence/ Divergence	Differences/ Similarities	Divergence/ Convergence	(Persistent?) Differences/ (Persistent?) Similarities
Past		Present	Future	

When addressing whether and to what extent national policies converge, this comparative approach can prove helpful in several regards. First, it permits us to take a picture of the

policies currently existing in different countries at the same moment in time and, on the basis of both policy beliefs and policy instruments, to determine how they relate to one another. Second, because it then goes back in time until the emergence of quality as a political issue, this approach also provides for the reconstruction of the process by which the existing national policies have become what they are. This is done by looking into the different factors at play in the construction of quality assurance as a policy domain and how they configure in different national environments. The national "stories" can then be compared in order to assess the relevance of the different factors in each national context and to sketch out potential future directions as regards policy convergence/divergence or persistent difference/similarity.

Consequently, the outcome of the column "What Will We Have?" will depend on how the different factors at play in the construction of the policy domain configure and on whether they constitute important barriers to cross-national convergence. In this sense, future international convergence or divergence will need to be analysed from what can be currently observed and, through the study of the emergence of the existing situation, from the elements that have prevented or facilitated the observed cross-national differences and/or similarities.

For that purpose, different types of concepts are needed, able to account for the synchronic and diachronic perspectives. On the one hand, the notions of difference and/or similarity permit the identification of a given situation at a particular moment in time. In the present study, differences and/or similarities are analysed through the ideational and material dimensions of public policies. To that end, the ideational foundations of the policy domain are investigated through the overall objectives identified for quality assurance in each country. From there, the policy instruments set up to implement the policy beliefs are pointed out. Here too, national differences and/or similarities are highlighted, thus providing the static picture of the quality assurance policy domain in the four countries. On the other hand, the notions of divergence and convergence are more valuable in analysing the developments within a particular policy domain. These diachronic concepts are addressed on the basis of the static picture previously taken. For instance, if differences appear to be the dominant characteristic among national policies for quality assurance, it will be necessary to investigate the *process* that has led to them. In parallel, the diachronic concepts will also be used to discuss future potential orientations in this policy domain. From this perspective, the

study of the past permits the reconstruction of the configuration of the different factors in each national context, which can then provide an understanding of the observed differences and/or similarities.

4.4. The Collection of Data and the Problems Related to It

As noted earlier, the methods of data collection have to be consistent with the researcher's epistemological position towards his/her object of study. In the present case, the non-experimental design orientates the collection of data towards qualitative strategies. The information needed to construct the line of reasoning and to support the argument presented in the four country reports has been gathered through two principal channels. The first is the extensive use of documentary material from different sources; the second is the conduct of semi-structured interviews with actors involved, at different levels and locations, in the quality debate and policy-making. If the strategy for data collection is qualitative, it is not necessarily so for the type of information collected. In effect, in order to address the different factors presented in chapter 3, attention also has to be paid to more quantitative information, such as the evolution of the number of students, the amount of public investment in HE and dropout rates.

Consequently, because of the type of research problem formulated and the epistemological framework within which they are addressed, the type of data collected combines qualitative and quantitative information. In the next section, the type of information and the problems encountered during its collection are discussed further.

4.4.1. Documentary Sources

The use of documents is often considered to be one of the characteristics of historical research, which is concerned:

> "(...) with a broad view of the conditions and not necessarily the specifics which bring them about, although such a synthesis is rarely achieved without intense debate or controversy on matters of detail."
>
> Cohen *et al.* 2000: 160

The type of documentary data used in historical research is generally grouped into two categories: primary and secondary sources. In the present study, both have been researched. Primary sources, i.e. "those items that are more original to the problem under scrutiny"

(Cohen *et al.* 2000: 160), encompass national legislation from the four countries on HE in general and, where available, quality assurance. Other types of primary sources included records of parliamentary debates, Green and White Papers, official ministerial reports and reports from agencies involved in the construction of the quality assurance policy domain. Together with the documentary analysis, a review of secondary sources has been carried out. Secondary sources have principally included academic writings, both journal publications and books. In addition, a scrutiny of national newspapers has also been undertaken to remain constantly up-to-date with national developments. These secondary sources can prove helpful when analysing the characteristics of the four national HE systems and the configuration of the factors potentially at play in the emergence of the quality debate and the construction of the policy domain.

The collection of primary and secondary sources presented two major difficulties. The first was related to the availability of the required documents, the second to their use. Concerning the materials' availability, early inquiries showed significant differences among the countries. The Dutch and English cases were fairly well documented and reported. There was therefore little difficulty in obtaining relevant information in academic publications, newspaper articles and government reports and legislation. Spain showed itself a bit more complicated inasmuch as fewer publications were available in international journals and academic books. As regards primary sources, especially concerning legal features of the Spanish HE system, the Internet proved very helpful - as it did throughout the research. Maybe more complicated, as regards the amount of secondary sources, was the Swiss case. The lack of secondary data was compensated for by a more intense scrutiny of primary sources, especially from governmental and HE agencies.

4.4.2. The Interviews

Alongside written documentation, the collection of data also encompassed interviews. These are among the most valuable source of information in social research. They permit insights to be obtained that are hardly accessible by other means. Moreover, because they permit a dialogue to be engaged in, their informative nature is complemented by their becoming a means for verifying data collected through other channels. In this sense, interviews are also a means for "triangulation", as further developed below. Interviews, however, are not an easy research tool to use. Not only are they time-consuming, as Cohen and Manion recall (1989: 319), but they also encompass a number of pitfalls the researcher needs to be aware of.

In the first place, conducting interviews is a social activity. It brings together two - or more - people for the purpose of discussing a topic both of them are assumed to be interested in or, at least, to know something about. As Reddy (1979) points out, interviews are arenas where both the researcher/interviewer and the informant/interviewee have assigned roles they are assumed to perform. The researcher/interviewer fabricates a message, builds it up and sends it to a receptor, i.e. the informant/interviewee, who has to unpack the information and interpret it before sending his own message/reply. This situation of assigned roles implies that a number of problems can emerge before, during and sometimes after the interview. Although a comprehensive review of these problems is beyond the scope of this section, the problems that have arisen from the interviews carried out in the present study are worth some elaboration. How this author has dealt with them had methodological and ethical implications. The former are discussed in the following paragraphs as an introduction to more practical questions, whereas the latter are addressed in section 4.4.4.

Because they are social activities, interview sessions are asymmetrical relationships. By asymmetrical relationships is meant that the persons involved in an interview session are not holding equal positions. The researcher/interviewer and the informant/interviewee often come from different backgrounds, do not necessarily speak the same language, and in many cases, are moved away from their working environment. Interviews, at the end of the day, involve power relations of a special kind: they are neither pre-determined nor immutable but can evolve during the interview itself. They are not pre-determined inasmuch as interviews can be done with very different informants, depending on the topic under investigation. In this sense, discussing with a young schoolgirl or schoolboy what s/he thinks of the new curricula is rather different from an interview with the Chief Executive of a nation-wide HE organisation. It is different as regards the kind of questions one can ask and the way they can be asked; it is different as regards the forms of body language one is potentially able to use; it is different as regards the attitude to adopt during the discussion and with relation to the interviewee.

The relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is not, however, immutable. The "balance of power" (Block 1993: 40) inherent to every interview can and needs to be modified if full advantage of the situation is to be taken. This is especially crucial if the interviews take place abroad or if they involve key actors whose agendas do not easily allow for a second interview. In both cases, the necessity to gain as much information as possible

requires the interviewer to be aware of the problems related to interviews and to develop some strategies to attenuate them. For instance, the interviewer can be in an unfavourable position as regards, for instance, her/his age but can overturn this disadvantage by fully mastering the topic of the discussion.

All these elements were taken into consideration when preparing for the interviews. The planning began with the identification of the informants that would be most appropriate to meet. In most cases, the interviewees were selected from the agencies involved in HE policy in each country. Between the mid-1980s and the late 1990s, the selected interviewees were involved in the formulation of quality assurance policies in their respective countries either as top-civil servants, leaders in institutional organisations or responsible for the implementation of the policies. Once identified, first contact was made with the persons either through electronic or normal mail. A short description of the aims of the research and the reasons why they had been approached was provided, together with a brief outline of the topics that would be discussed and potential dates for the interviews. This way of proceeding is consistent with what Taylor and Bogdan (1984: 78-105) name an "overt" framework of data collection. Although not all the interviewees paid much attention to the topics, most were able to determine the areas of interest more clearly. They were thus able to better prepare for the interviews and also to prepare some documents in relation to the topics.

Altogether, 26 people were interviewed during 23 semi-structured interview sessions held in the different countries. The primary purpose of the interviews was informative although, as the research progressed and, with it, this author's knowledge of each country's realities, they also became a way of validating information obtained from other sources. The interviews were done in the language of the interviewees, with the exception of the Dutch respondents with whom English was spoken. The duration varied from just under one hour to more than three hours. They were normally held at the interviewees' respective working places. All but one interview were tape recorded with the agreement of the interviewees. In parallel, hand notes were taken during all sessions in order to facilitate subsequent contextualisation, especially when the interviews were conducted abroad and it was not possible to transcribe the data straight after it had been collected. All interviews were fully transcribed not only to remain as close as possible to the interviewee's opinions but also to retain a record of the research (Fitz and Halpin 1994). Some editing work was inevitable to provide coherent narratives and a more readable text. Again, this is consistent with the principal purpose of the

interviews. All the transcripts were then sent back to the interviewees for them to comment on possible mistakes, misunderstanding or factual errors. The use of the interviews as an informative technique to collect and triangulate data allowed for procedures of these kinds, something which would not have been possible if engaged, for instance, in a discourse analysis. In order to facilitate the reading while remaining faithful to the respondent, all the quotations have been translated into English and the original version has been added as a footnote. All the interviews have been coded to avoid possible identification of the respondent. The coding system together with a brief presentation of each interviewee and an explanation of how the information collected was used can be found in Appendix 2. A full transcript of the interviews is in the possession of the supervisor of the present study.

The information collected from the interviews and the different documentary sources were progressively checked against each other, which allowed for triangulation and enhanced the overall validity of the study.

4.4.3. Validity of the Research

When dealing with qualitative methodologies and techniques of data collection, concerns for validation acquire great importance. This is especially true as regards the criticisms received from proponents of quantitative methods of investigation (Kerlinger 1973: 401) or from those qualitative researchers endorsing quasi-experimental designs in HE studies (Goedegebuure and van Vught 1994: 14). Qualitative non-experimental social researchers have been increasingly put under pressure to strengthen their methodological frameworks and to clarify the extent to which their conclusions can be considered valid. They have been doing so by taking into account the two dimensions generally referred to when talking about validation: internal and external validity (Sommer and Sommer 1986; Cohen *et al.* 2000: 105-117). Concerns for the internal validity of the research have to do with the extent to which the data collected allows the argument advanced in the research to be sustained. Consequently, a process of research will be considered internally valid if the conclusions reached can be sustained by the information gathered during the study. By contrast, external validity is concerned with whether and to what extent the conclusions drawn from the research can be generalised to contexts other than those within which the study has been conducted.

Both internal and external validity has been addressed by qualitative non-experimental researchers who have emphasised the need to depart from the positivist paradigm. This is, for

instance, the case for Guba and Lincoln (1989: 245-250), who argue in favour of *authenticity* rather than *validity* when it comes to discussing the relevance of a study. From another perspective, Hammersley (1992: 69-72) considers that qualitative researchers tend to trade off *certainty* about the results they might get from their investigation with *confidence* in the fact that the results are accurate and have been brought to light in a rigorous way. Discussing the issue of validity in comparative politics, Peters considers that "[I]nternal versus external validity is (...) another trade-off in comparative research" (1998: 48). It is not possible to have both and preference has to be given to one over the other. The consequences for the validity of the research stem, almost inevitably, from this choice. For Peters, the balance between the two types of validity favours the internal dimension when the research is undertaken within an experimental design and the external one when a non-experimental design is adopted (Peters 1998: 48). This distinction appears important inasmuch as it links up with, and reinforces, the earlier discussion about research paradigms. It does so because it further stresses the importance of the researcher's standpoint towards her/his object of study. The choice referred to above is not made in an intellectual vacuum, but is shaped and somewhat oriented by the research paradigm within which the whole research process takes place.

Peter's distinction points out some of the difficulties with which social scientists are confronted. Although not totally avoidable, these difficulties can nonetheless be attenuated. As regards internal validity, this can be done by resorting to what has come to be known as triangulation (Denzin 1978: 28-29). Triangulation is a strategy that consists of the combination of two or more methods of data collection in order to verify and reinforce the pertinence of the conclusions. As noted, the present study has combined two types of data collection: documentary analysis and interviews. The information gathered during (or lacking from) the analysis of the different documents has facilitated the construction of the interview grid. At the same time, the interviews have permitted verification and better assessment of some of the elements argued in the research, especially as regards the relevance of the different factors at play in the construction of the quality assurance policy domain. Another form of triangulation was also adopted by cross-checking the information provided by the interviewees and by diversifying the types of documents consulted. In this sense, the present research has tried to limit the deficit of internal validity for non-experimental research

designs, in Peters' terms, by using the triangulation technique both between the methods and within the information collected by means of each method.

As regards the external validity of the present research, special attention has been paid to the selection of the countries within which the domains of quality assurance are studied. The potential generalisation of the results of the study is difficult to appreciate exactly. As noted, working within a non-experimental research paradigm leaves the door open to interpretation in the way the data is collected and analysed. Theoretically, identical conclusions should be reached in other contexts by the same researcher working within the same paradigm and using the same strategy of data collection. This would be the proof that the conclusions can be generalised to other countries than the ones discussed here.

In the present research, the potential generalisation has been taken seriously both as regards the selection of the countries and the factors potentially at play in the emergence of quality as a political issue and the construction of the policy domain. The same attention has been paid to the identification of the fundamental policy choices in quality assurance and the determination of potential responses. The potential factors form a set of conditions that, although limited because of the scope of the study, can be looked at in different environments. Similarly, the identification of the fundamental choices in the domain of quality assurance as generic categories makes it possible to export them to other countries.

4.4.4. Ethical Issues

Concerns about the validity of the data collected and the accuracy of the method of its collection and analysis are as important as concerns about ethical issues in the conduct of the research. It is so when the strategies for data collection affect the participants but also as regards the process through which the research is constructed and the object(s) of study selected. In the first case, the researcher is confronted with the confidentiality s/he has to offer to the information-provider. Although indispensable, confidentiality is not always easy to ensure, especially when the participants are part of a relatively small community. A second ethical question, and a methodological one as well, derives from the involvement of the researcher in the research process itself. The question in this case addresses whether and to what extent objectivity can be achieved when analysing historically- and time-located social phenomena. These two problems emerged during the construction, and subsequent conduction, of the research process. How they were addressed is now discussed.

Addressing the question of the researcher's involvement in the construction and conduct of the research process needs to be done within the paradigm within which the research process is developed. The present research evolves within a non-experimental paradigm and, despite the criticism similar approaches can cause among other researchers, rigorous methods can be followed. As regards the involvement of the researcher in the research process, the present author finds it hard to sustain total objectivity, especially as regards the selection of the case and the context within which it is studied (see 4.3.1). If total detachment can hardly be achieved in the selection of the case and the context of investigation, it is not necessarily so for the conduct of the research itself. For that purpose, the study was carried out within as rigorous a framework as possible both as regards the collection of the data and its treatment. By so doing, this author attempted to limit the interference of the researcher with her/his object and, with the use of triangulation, to ensure the validity of the conclusions.

Apart from the question of the researcher's involvement in the research process, ethical issues emerged as regards the confidentiality promised to and requested by the persons who where interviewed. Confidentiality implies that although the researcher knows the informant, s/he ensures her/him that everything possible will be done to prevent her/him from being identified by the information s/he provides (Cohen *et al.* 2000: 62). Confidentiality has been respected in every case by coding the interviewees' responses. This, however, may not be enough. In effect, although all interviews were coded, the quotes extracted from the interviews were always accompanied by a (very) short description of the person who was talking (see Appendix 2). This is indispensable to provide the reader with an idea of the position from which the discourse is pronounced but, at the same time, endangers the confidentiality promised to the interviewee. This is not an easy problem either, especially when the respondents are key people involved in quality assurance policy. In practice, it is almost impossible to ensure total confidentiality, particularly when one takes the countries one by one. In this case, the number of actors dealing with issues such as the one treated here is relatively limited and, to some extent, they all are part of the same "community". A member of this community could more or less easily identify the persons whose opinion has been quoted in the narrative. This is especially true as regards national environments but less true when, for instance, a Spanish reader considers the English case. The author of the present study has taken all possible measures to abstract as much as possible the quotation

from possible identification. It is, however, impossible to remain fully faithful to the interviewees' opinion without accepting that a (limited) risk still exists that the interviewee will be recognised.

Another problem of confidentiality arose when the discussion entered a topic the interviewee was not keen to talk about openly, let alone have recorded on tape. Because the issue was a crucial element of the interview list, it was agreed to turn the tape-recorder off and let the interviewee talk without even taking notes. This strategy was used to avoid losing a piece of information that was potentially available but that the interviewee did not want to provide openly. The ethical issue then arises of whether to include the information so collected within the general amount of data and if so, how best to do it. This is far from being an easy issue especially when no other form of information, which would confirm the views was available. Because of the importance of the information provided, it was agreed with the supervisor of this study that crucial insights would have been lost if they had not been mentioned. It was therefore decided to retain the information but to deal with it more attentively as regards its translation in written form.

4.5. Summary

This chapter had two objectives: to discuss the research paradigm governing this study and to justify this choice; and to present the techniques of data collection and data analysis and some of the problems related to these processes. As a result, the study was anchored within an interpretive, non-experimental research paradigm. This choice derived from this author's standpoints regarding the nature of knowledge in the social sciences and its transmission. It led to considering qualitative methodologies for data collection and data analysis. Concerns for the de-naturalisation of social reality were met in the framework proposed for comparative analysis. Here, the distinction between synchronic and diachronic dimensions was seen as a valuable tool for understanding where we are now and where we might be going in the domain of quality assurance policy.

The following chapters enter the empirical part of the study. They constitute four country reports of the development of quality assurance policy on the basis of the theoretical and methodological elements presented so far.

Chapter 5 England

5.1. Introduction

By international standards, the reforms experienced by British HE since the early 1980s represent one of the most important transformations of state-university relationships and the advent of strict regulations of the sector to comply with new ideologies. As a result, HE institutions in England are now exposed to more scrutiny than their European counterparts, in particular those of the countries covered in this study. The significance of this is twofold. First, institutional autonomy has progressively been eroded, as former buffer bodies were replaced by regulatory ones. Second, quality assurance policy has become a crucial domain in a tightly controlled and regulated system.

This chapter analyses how the domain of quality assurance policy in England has been structured over the last two decades or so. To that end, it starts with an outline of the most significant political and societal features. Attention is first paid to the characteristics of the *Westminster Democracy* and, then, to its implications for the organisation of policy domains. Section 5.3 then discusses the principal characteristics of HE both before and after 1992 and the abolition of the binary system. After that, section 5.4 presents the principal actors currently involved in HE policy-making and their role in the domain of quality assurance. Against this general background, sections 5.5 and 5.6 address the issue of quality assurance policy following the theoretical and methodological approaches developed earlier. Finally, section 5.7 summarises the main findings of the chapter.

5.2. Political and Societal Features in England

This section discusses the political and societal features influencing the formulation of HE policy in England. First, the role the different political features are addressed. Then a description of the organisation of the policy domains and the relations between central and local governments is provided.

5.2.1. Westminster Democracy

Political scientists often use the term *Westminster Democracy* when referring to the British political system, characterised by the relatively unchecked dominance enjoyed by the governing party[29] (Lijphart 1984; Lane and Ersson 2000: 215-218). This situation stems from the structure of government in the UK that tends to emphasise the majority party over policy formulation and policy-making[30] (Bonoli 2000: 53). The majoritarian rule is supported by two elements. First, the electoral system means that the party gaining a plurality of the votes in a general election is assured of a majority in Parliament[31]. Second, because of the lack of a written Constitution that would limit its power[32], the appointed government enjoys a large room for manoeuvre in Parliament (Budge 1996: 33). This is further increased by the principle of party mandate by which the winning party is expected to implement the electoral programme presented in the Party Manifesto. Such an arrangement offers popular legitimacy to the government, thus substantially reducing the prerogatives of the Parliament and creating strong party discipline. Consequently, the Parliament is not seen as a constraint but rather as the context within which the government rules.

The government is headed by the leader of the winning party at a general election and is generally referred to as the Prime Minister (PM). S/he appoints and chairs the Cabinet, i.e. the top executive committee (Birch 1998: 129; Burch 1988: 20). In addition, the PM can also appoint members of other committees and decision-making bodies, as can the members of the Cabinet. The main function of the Cabinet is to discuss policy issues and reach

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29 Forms of control, however, do exist as, for instance, the principle of party competition (Budge 1996) by which a government would tend to limit the potential dissatisfaction with policies that could result in a transfer of electoral support to another party. This principle, however, implies that there must be a competition among the parties, or that the ruling government perceives some policy alternatives as potentially successful. In addition, considering party competition as a potential form of control over a government also implies that the policy domain under consideration is a sensitive issue or, at least, an issue that a majority of the electorate can feel concerned by.

30 The United Kingdom is a parliamentary democracy. It has generally been admitted that the British political system is a two-party system where the Conservative Party and the Labour Party compete for the majority of seats. The presence of a dominant party ruling alone has been the norm since World War II. Other parties, such as the Liberal Democrats or regional parties, generally gained seats in Parliament but have not been able to obtain sufficient support to rule the country. The two-party system implies that the exercise of government and opposition depends on party obedience

31 For instance, during most of the period studied here, the Conservative Party managed to retain a large parliamentary majority although it never achieved more than 43.9% of the votes (Budge 1996: 20).

32 The lack of a formal written constitution should not hide the fact that several do exist to codify political behaviour. Among these, the *Bill of Rights* (1689) is the best known. It is certainly as important as the *Act of Settlement* (1701) or the *Parliament Acts* (1911 and 1949) in defining the powers of the different

consensual decisions that are binding. If a Minister does not agree with a decision, s/he has little alternative: accept or resign, which further strengthens the position of the PM.

The British Parliament is composed of two Houses. The Lower House, or House of Commons, is the most important. It has five main functions: representation, legislation, scrutiny, forum of debate and recruitment and training of government members (Coxall and Robins 1994: 204-211). However, the powers of the Members of Parliament (MPs) tend to be limited by the above mentioned party discipline, which means that a governmental proposal can hardly be rejected in the Lower House. The latter has several Select Committees to examine aspects of public policy and administration (Bentley *et al.* 1995: 414-415). Although their influence on policy-making may not be decisive, they do constitute an important part of the context within which policy is formulated (Kogan and Hanney 2000: 206). According to Salter and Tapper (1994: Chap. 3) the impact of Select Committees increased after 1979. This was especially true for the Public Accounts Committee and its accountability concerns regarding the bodies funding the universities as well as the Education Committee as regards the general organisation of education.

The House of Lords is the Upper House of the British Parliament. It has four main competencies: to deliberate about issues of interest, to take part in the legislative process[33], to scrutinise the executive government and to act as Supreme Court of Appeal (Coxall and Robins 1994: 220). Since the passing of the Reform Act in 1983, its prerogatives have been eroded, and discussions have recently taken place to transform it into a proper representative body (*The Guardian* 21.01.1999, 01.02.1999). The House of Lords played a substantial role in the debates that surrounded the passing of the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). On this occasion, the Lords opposed the view that, under the new Act, the Secretary of State could direct the bodies funding HE. Emphasis was also put on tenure and academic freedom, where the Lords were able to impose their amendments to the Act (Dennison 1989: 92; Kogan and Hanney 2000: 155-156; Ngaio 1989: 13).

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political institutions. Similarly, the *Representation of the People Acts* (1948 and 1949) regulate the electoral system (Birch 1998: 21).

33 There are two major limitations in the Upper House's legislative power. First, the House does not oppose proposals that have been part of the ruling party's electoral Manifesto at the previous general election. Second, the House does not reach the point where the Parliament Acts need to be called upon. In this sense, when the Lower House adopts a public Bill in two successive sessions and the Upper House rejects it in both, the Bill directly receives Royal Assent after the second refusal (Coxall and Robins 1994: 221).

Public administration is grouped into autonomous Ministries and Departments. The government normally appoints a limited number of new civil servants. A new Minister would work with already present non-political civil servants and would appoint some officers for particular positions, thus making her/him dependent on civil servants for policy implementation and advice (Budge 1996: 43). During the 1980s, the Conservative Government engaged in a substantial modification of the structure of the administration. Known as the "Next Step Initiatives", changes prompted a reduction of the Ministries and Departments' size and a refocus of their work on policy development. The implementation of the policy was left to autonomous executive agencies, the so-called QUANGOS, quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations, set up on a statutory basis to perform a number of functions determined by the government, which also appoints its members (Bentley *et al.* 1995: 496-502).

5.2.2. Majoritarian Rule and the Organisation of the Policy Domains

The British political system is, thus, characterised by a strong centralisation of power. This centralisation, however, is not reflected in the process of policy implementation. Rather, as Budges recalls (1996: 51), Britain lacks a field administration in several policy domains, which makes Ministries and Departments dependent on other bodies and institutions to see their decisions implemented. The above-mentioned QUANGOS are one form of such bodies. The networks of local authorities are another.

Local authorities are locally elected political institutions, although they are mostly funded by the central government. They form a substantial part of the public sector in Britain. Their current structure dates back to the early 1960s and 1970s when the London Government Act (1963) and the Local Government Act (1973) were passed (Bentley *et al.* 1995: 469). The responsibilities of local authorities as regards the delivery of services vary according to their size, the larger being responsible for education and health for instance. Local authorities have played an important role in HE. They were responsible for the co-ordination and control of the non-university sector that developed in the 1960s. Later in the chapter, closer attention is paid to the way this was done. For the moment, suffice it to say that local education authorities (LEAs) controlled the public sector of HE until 1982, when the National Advisory Body for Local Authority Higher Education (NAB) took over its responsibilities. The role of local authorities in HE ended with the passing of the ERA.

It is important to take account of the particularity of local government in Britain inasmuch as the changes that took place in HE over the 1980s and 1990s cannot be fully understood without looking at the struggles then happening between central government and local authorities. Since the early 1980s, there has been an increasing conflict between the two levels mainly on matters of financial restraint (Birch 1998: 186-199; Stocker 1988: 13-19). This opposition led to the abolition, in 1986, of the Greater London Council and the Metropolitan County Council by the government of the day (Rhoades 1992: 67). In this perspective, the restructuring of local government was a central element for the achievement of the Conservative political project. As Williamson notes:

> "Only by changing the institutional parameters of the policy process could the New Right policies in education, housing and community care be realised, as well as helping to meet their wider concern in restructuring the economy and building a durable body of support for their reforms."
>
> Williamson 1995: 86

This section has discussed the political and societal features important in HE policy formulation and policy-making in Britain. Emphasis has been placed on the centralisation of political power within the executive and the decentralisation of the administration and how it affects policy implementation. In the following pages, the discussion turns to the system of HE.

5.3. The English System of Higher Education

This section outlines the English HE system. First, attention is paid to the situation as it was before the passing of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act (HMSO 1992) and the subsequent abolition of the binary divide. Then, the focus turns to the system as currently observable. An important issue for the chapter is the extent to which structural differences between the two sectors impacted on the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue and on the form the domain adopted over the years.

5.3.1. The System Before 1992

Before 1988, English HE was composed of two sectors, the university or autonomous sector on the one hand, and the polytechnics and colleges of HE sector or public sector, on the

other. This binary divide[34] was the political response to the claims for expansion made by the Robbins Report in 1963 (Robbins 1963). The Report proposed to enlarge the university sector, a view shared by most universities but not by the political authorities. In two speeches given in Woolwich in 1965 and Lancaster in 1967, the then Minister of Education, Anthony Crosland, rejected this feature of the Committee's proposals (Crosland 1965, 1967). Admittedly, expansion had to be met, but only partially along the lines recommended by Robbins. How this was done is now discussed.

5.3.1.1. The University Sector

The origins of HE in Britain date back to the establishment of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in 1264 and 1284 respectively (HEFCE 1994c). These institutions have remained exceptional as regards their collegiate model of internal organisation and have developed largely autonomously (Scott 1991: 367). Until the early 19th century, they were the only universities in England[35], before the system began to expand. At first, the "Victorian expansion" led to the creation of twelve universities[36]. Then, during the 20th century, London-sponsored colleges were set up. This expansion was met by the upgrading of ten colleges of advanced technology into formal technological universities and the creation of eight "green field" universities[37]. Until the mid-1980s, all these institutions enjoyed a large autonomy based on the principle of academic freedom. Universities could grant their own degrees, determine the number of students they were willing to accept, define their own statutes, design their own curricula and the procedures to assess students' performance (Bland 1990: 23; Farrant 1987: 31). The University Grants Committee (UGC) played a major role in maintaining the university sector away from political influence and in the shape it adopted during the 1960s (Scott 1995b; see also Shattock 1994; Shattock and Berdhal 1984, Shinn

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34 For a wider discussion of the binary structure of British HE, see, for instance: Pratt and Burgess 1974; Pratt 1997; Donaldson 1975; DES 1966; Sharp 1987.

35 Meanwhile, Scotland had witnessed the creation of four Universities in the 15th and 16th centuries: St Andrews (1411), Glasgow (1451), Aberdeen (1495) and Edinburgh (1583).

36 These were Durham and Newcastle (1832), Belfast (1845), London (1836), Wales (1893), Bristol (1876), Manchester (1880), Dundee (1881), Liverpool (1881), Leeds (1884) Sheffield (1897) and Birmingham (1898).

37 These were: Sussex (1961), York (1963), East Anglia (1964), Essex (1961), Kent (1964), Lancaster (1964), Warwick (1965) and Stirling (1967). These "new" universities differed from their "old" counterparts, especially as regards the organisation of the programme areas. They tended to offer courses more closely interrelated with one another and focused on an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge mainly organised around arts and humanities (Boys *et al.* 1988: 224; Scott 1991: 373).
It is important to note that the creation of the ten colleges of advanced technology was the result of Robbins' recommendations, whereas the creation of the "green field" institutions was not.

1986). The UGC was established in 1919 to regularise the state's financial support to the universities. A five-year planning system had already been in operation with the UGC's predecessor, the University Colleges Committee, since 1908 (Shinn 1986: 29). From 1924 onwards, the quinquennial system was established on a regular basis (Shattock 1994: 15), which meant that the UGC received the amounts directly from the Treasury and, from 1963, the Department of Education and Science (DES)[38] and shared it among the institutions. These were free to use their funds as they wished within the wide boundaries set in the regulations. How the UGC decided on the amounts to be granted to each institution was almost a mystery and external attempts to clearly define the way the amounts had to be used would have appeared as an attack on academic freedom[39].

The 1980s saw an increasing influence of the political authorities over HE, which culminated in the publication of the White Paper *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* in 1987 (DES 1987a) and the subsequent passing of the ERA in 1988. For the autonomous sector, the most significant change was the abolition of the UGC and its replacement with the universities Funding Council (UFC). The UFC no longer had an advisory status, which cut down a privileged channel for university lobbying. In addition, membership of the new funding council reflected less academic influence than was the case with its predecessor. Finally, the UFC was granted power to determine how funds allocated to universities were to be used, which was totally new in the sector (Scott 1995b: 12-13). Changes in the funding patterns were accompanied by increasing concerns for accountability, efficiency and quality. Section 5.2 below, discusses in detail how this developed and how the universities were progressively put under political control.

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38 Until 1963, the UGC received the funds directly from the Treasury, in contrast to what happened with all other educational institutions that were funded by the Ministry of Education. It was the Robbins Committee that pointed out the need to put the universities under the rule of the DES. This implied that: "(...) the universities had to compete with schools and further education colleges for their budgets and they were responsible to a Department which had direct educational interests. The DES did not attempt to interfere in the academic affairs of universities but it was concerned with issues such as student numbers and the broad patterns of enrolment by subject. The Secretary of State for Education and Science was expected to answer for the universities in Parliament" (Williams 1995: 5).

39 It is worth remembering that despite the difficulties and disagreements, the UGC engaged, in the late 1980s, in a quality assessment of research activities in each university department. The methodology used by the UGC was going to be central to the procedures developed by the HEFCE since 1992.

5.3.1.2. The Non-University Sector

The non-university sector of HE was organised around two main sets of institutions, the polytechnics and the colleges of HE. Together they formed the public sector of HE. These institutions offered vocational courses at under- and postgraduate level. Due to their origins, polytechnics had close links with local businesses and industries and were not expected to undertake research, although this situation changed over the years.

In contrast to the universities, the institutions from the public sector did not enjoy much autonomy. They were dependent on the LEAs who exercised a tight control of their general education features and their budgets as well as the conditions of service for academic staff. Courses offered in the polytechnics needed approval from the regional advisory body, the DES and, from 1982 onwards, the NAB[40] (Jones and Kiloh 1987: 112-113; Nixon 1987). In addition, their courses were periodically validated by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). The CNAA had been established in 1964 as a degree-awarding body with the task of assuring external stakeholders that the standards of its qualifications were equivalent to those of the universities. The Council played a major role in the development of periodical external reviews of the quality of the courses delivered by the polytechnics[41] and operated institutional reviews to ensure that an institution was able to provide an appropriate environment in which standards could be maintained and enhanced. Moreover, non-degree courses needed validation from external professional bodies such as the Business and Technological Education Council (Scott and Wagner 1994: 34). Besides the CNAA, Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) was also involved in quality matters. Since its establishment, HMI's had investigated the quality of educational provision and reported directly to the Secretary of State. Both the CNAA and the HMI highlight the importance of external

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40 The NAB was the solution adopted in the early 1980s to the need for a centralised structure of authority in the public sector with the objectives of reducing the costs of provision and imposing a reorientation of the subject balance towards the domains favoured by the government. Its establishment followed the recommendations of the Oakes Report in 1978 (Oakes 1978) and was intended to reflect the collaboration between the local and central levels and ensure better co-ordination in the entire sector, especially as regards funding issues. To some extent, NAB was the functional equivalent of the UGC the in autonomous sector, although substantial differences as regards the composition or the patterns of funding prevailed (Williams 1990: 261-262).

41 For that purpose, the Council focused on six main areas: the resources, human and material, available for the provision of the course; the aims and objectives of the course; the course's content; the admission procedures; the assessment procedures as well as the general course management (Harvey *Ed.* 1993: 118-119). The CNAA progressively modified its approach to course validation to permit a better collaboration with the institutions. This began in the mid-1970s (CNAA 1975, 1979) and culminated in 1987 when the polytechnics were granted the power to approve individual courses as long as the CNAA could be ensured that they disposed of the appropriate review mechanisms.

validation procedures in the public sector. Unknown among the universities, they were going to become crucial in the years ahead.

The passing of the ERA in 1988 marked the beginning of the end for the binary divide. The polytechnics were granted corporate status, thus becoming employers of their staff and owners of their buildings. More importantly, they were taken away from the LEAs' control through the abolition of the NAB and its replacement with a new Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC).

5.3.2. The Unified System

The Education Reform Act was the first stage towards the unification of the system that came with the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. The latter put historical, old and new universities under identical regulations. The polytechnics were eventually granted university status and degree-awarding powers. In parallel, all the institutions were put under the same funding arrangements, now managed by three newly created national Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCE 1994c: § 2.5).

The 1990s justified earlier fears of an increasing intrusion of the political authorities in HE. It is a fact that since the coming to power of the Conservative Government strong emphasis was put on the role of the market in HE. But it is also true that the political authorities have not abandoned the idea of controlling the system. For Brennan and Shah (1994: 304-306; see also Whitty *et al.* 1998), this can be observed through programmes initiated by the government for whose funds the institutions had to bid. An even more significant example is the increasing concern for quality and the progressive construction of a set of systematised procedures to ensure and publicise it. This is the subject of further elaboration below.

Having outlined the system of HE, the discussion continues with a description of the most important actors involved in policy-making in the domain of HE and their prerogatives in quality assurance.

5.4. Actors Involved in British Higher Education Policy

HE in England is regulated today by the central government. The network of actors shows a number of statutory bodies working on behalf of the government but enjoying some internal

room for manoeuvre. The following paragraphs offer a first insight into the bodies and agencies at play in the making of HE policy in England as of December 2000.

5.4.1. The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)

The most important body regarding HE is the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). The DfEE was established in November 1995 and is headed by a Secretary of State. The DfEE has changed name several times during the period analysed in this study (Aldrich *et al.* 2000). When first established in the mid-1960s, it was called the Department of Education and Science (DES) and, in 1963, was made responsible for the funding of teaching and research in universities. In 1992, the DES was renamed the Department for Education (DfE) and the funding of research was transferred to the Office of Science and Technology under the general responsibility of the Department for Trade and Industry[42] (Salter and Tapper 1994: 194). At the same time, the Science branch of the DES was transferred to the Office of Public Service and Science, thus making education, the only responsibility of the Department of Education (DfE). In June 2001, it became the Department for Education and Science.

The role of the Department in the formulation of policies for HE is often questioned. For instance, Shattock (1994: 8) recalls that two of the most sensitive issues for university education had not been sponsored by the DES. Similarly, Allen (1988: 88) points out that the DES had traditionally little influence on the formulation of the general goals of HE but rather seemed to concentrate on finding agreements among the different bodies involved in the policy domain. The weaknesses pointed out by these authors, however, should not lead us to forget that, as previously noted, the Department of Education has enjoyed substantial independence from Parliament[43].

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42 It is worth noting, however, that the research funds underpinning the academic work of selected universities remained the responsibility of the HEFCE under the DfEE.

43 Birch (1998: 25) gives an illuminating example, which is worth quoting in full: "An example [of the room for manoeuvre enjoyed by the administration as regards parliamentary control] is the decision to bring about a major expansion of higher education that followed the publication of the Robbins Report in 1963. The first point to note about this is that the report was not made available to MPs until the government had considered its contents and formulated a policy in regard to its recommendations. This policy was in fact announced by the Prime Minister the day after the report was published. The second point to not is that the application of this policy was entirely a matter for executive action. The amount of money made available for university expansion was decided by the Treasury and the Minister for Higher Education, with the Cabinet acting as arbiter in case of dispute. It is true that Parliament had to authorize this expenditure, but the British Parliament has no power to increase financial estimates presented to it and has never been

Recent evidence by Kogan and Hanney (2000: 163-166) confirms the limited role of the DES in the generation of policy for HE. The authors acknowledge the progressive increase in centralisation within the DES, thus following the Tapper and Salter argument (1994), but point out the crucial role played by the Ministers in the formulation of HE policy during the 1980s.

5.4.2. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

The HEFCE was established together with its Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish counterparts with the passing of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. The HEFCE is responsible for the allocation of funds to English universities and for ensuring that the amounts are used according to the guidelines. To that end, a financial memorandum is set with each institution specifying the conditions to be met in order to receive public financial support (HEFCE 1994c: § 6.1). The HEFCE is run by a Board of 15 members appointed for three years by the Secretary of State for Education and whose composition reflects a mix of academics and representatives of society. The HEFCE operates largely through committees, sub-committees and working groups that advise the Board on particular topics such as teaching, research or quality assurance.

Since its establishment, the HEFCE has played an important role as regards quality assurance. On the one hand, it has been responsible for the assessment of teaching between 1992 and 1997, through a Quality Assessment Division (QAD). On the other, it has organised the assessment of research via the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) since 1995.

5.4.3. The Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP)

Universities UK, formerly CVCP, is the current collective body of the universities[44]. It was established in 1918 and is composed of the executive heads of the universities and colleges of HE in the UK. The CVCP has played a more important role since the early 1980s when it became the universities' voice in front of the DES and the UGC. The abolition of the UGC in

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known to decrease them. When new universities were established in the 1960s and in 1992, these universities were granted degree-giving power by royal charter, no parliamentary action being required. By the same token, the reductions in public grants to universities between 1979 and 1984 were also decided upon within the administration, without effective control by Parliament."

[44] The name was changed in November 2000 to make more explicit its function as a pressure group representing the collective interests of the British universities.

1988 further increased the importance of the CVCP as the representative body of the institutions.

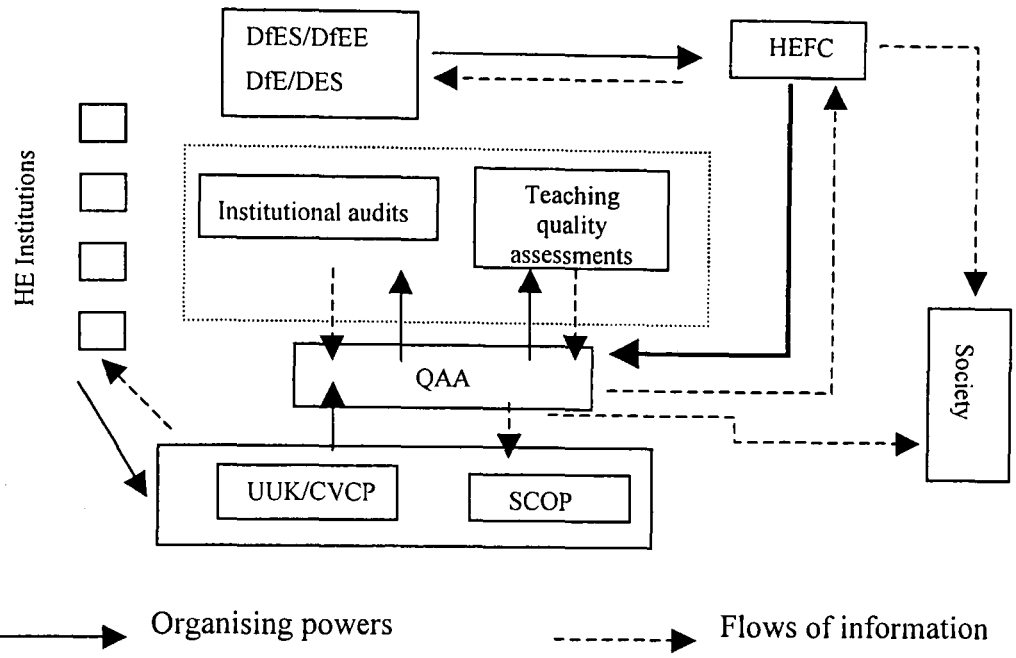
In the domain of quality assurance, the CVCP has supported a number of institutions in their criticisms of the instruments currently in use. In this sense, Universities UK, together with the HEFCE and the Standing Committee of Principals (SCOP), published a joint document in March 2001 responding to governmental decisions to modify the system of quality assurance (HEFCE *et al.* 2001). The involvement of the "historical" CVCP in quality assurance policy dates back to the early 1980s and culminated in the creation of the Academic Audit Unit (AAU), as an attempt to pre-empt governmental intrusion in the autonomous sector of HE. In the unified system, the CVCP continued to be active in the domain of quality assurance by putting together the work of the AAU and that of the CNAA in the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC).

5.4.4. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

The QAA was established in March 1997 as the principal body for quality assurance in British HE. It originates from the merger of the bodies previously responsible for the assessment of subject areas and the institutional audits. The Agency is an independent body funded by subscribing universities and colleges of HE and by contracts with the Funding Councils of England and Wales. Its members are the heads of the representative bodies of HE institutions in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and representatives from the Higher Education Funding Council for England and Wales and Department of Education for Northern Ireland. QAA's Board of Directors is composed of 14 members. 4 are appointed by the representative bodies of the institutions of HE, 4 by the Funding Councils and the remaining 6, including the Chairman, by the Board itself and represent external interests, such as employers associations. The funding of the Agency originates from the subscriptions of the institutions and from contracts passed with the Funding Councils of England and Wales. QAA reviews the performance of universities and colleges of HE. It does so by juggling with two constraints. On the one hand, primary responsibility for the establishment, maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards remains with the institutions themselves. On the other hand, the QAA must act on behalf of the Funding Councils so that they can meet their statutory obligation to ensure that provision exists to assess the quality of the education they fund.

This section has outlined the principal actors currently at play in the domain of HE policy and their role as regards quality assurance. Figure 5.1 provides an overview of how they relate.

FIGURE 5.1. RELATIONSHIPS AMONG ACTORS IN THE DOMAIN OF QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION



The following sections aim at analysing how the issue of quality assurance has been progressively shaped over the last two decades. They are based on the above theoretical and methodological discussions.

5.5. Quality Assurance Policy in English Higher Education: The Synchronic View

This section presents the structure of the quality assurance policy domain in England as of December 2000. By then, quality assurance was under heavy criticism from the institutions and important changes were forecasted. The QAA had begun to operate its "new approach" to subject review in Scotland and Northern Ireland (QAA 2000a). In England, quality assurance procedures were still based on the instruments inherited from before the QAA. The following paragraphs overview the responses these instruments provided to the five fundamental choices in quality assurance in the English context.

Control: the QAA on behalf of the HEFCE

Control of the policy domain of quality assurance in English HE rests with the QAA. The latter assesses, on behalf of the HEFCE, the quality of the education provided through public money. The composition of the Agency reflects the limited role played by the sector in the policy domain and the influence of both governmental agencies and external actors. As such, the domain of quality assurance policy mirrors the transformations undergone in HE during the last two decades and the changes in the patterns of relationships among actors.

Objectives: primacy of summative arrangements with a touch of formative ones

The objectives of the policy domain derive from the requirements of section 70 of the Further and Higher Education Act that combine summative and formative arrangements. They relate to the HEFCE's obligation to secure value for public investment, to encourage improvement in the quality of education and to promote the diffusion of information on the overall quality of HE to society as a whole (QAA 2000b: 3). The QAA works to achieve these objectives by:

- "working with higher education institutions to promote and support continuous improvement in the quality and standards of provision;
- providing clear and accurate information to students, employers and others about the quality and standards of higher education provision;
- working with higher education institutions to develop and manage the qualifications framework;
- advising on the grant of degree awarding powers and university title;
- facilitating the development of benchmark information to guide subject standards;
- promulgating codes of practice and examples of good practice;
- operating programmes of review of performance at institutional and programme levels."

Evalueringcenteret 1998: 95

Areas covered: institutions and study programmes

The domains covered by the QAA include institutional audits and assessments of study programmes. In their current form, the audits constitute the continuation of the procedures undertaken in the universities by the AAU before the unification of the system. In 1997, a second cycle of audits began. The audits look into the means used by the institutions to ensure the quality of the programmes they offer and the degrees they award. Four areas are investigated: the strategy adopted by an institution to ensure quality; the standards of the programmes offered and the degrees awarded; the overall learning infrastructure and the internal and external communication mechanisms (Evalueringcenteret 1998: 99).

In parallel, the QAA runs subject reviews at the programme level. Here the focus is on the students' learning experiences and achievements. Subject reviews originate from the procedures established by the HEFCE in 1995 (HEFCE 1995a, b; HEFCE 1996). These have been taken over by the QAA. Subject reviews investigate six aspects of educational provision: curriculum design, content and organisation; teaching, learning and assessment; student progression and achievement; student support and guidance; learning resources and quality management and enhancement. Each aspect is graded on a 1 to 4 scale (QAA 2000b: 7-8).

Methods: internal and external procedures

Both the institution-wide audits and subject reviews are based on a similar methodology. The latter encompasses a self-assessment report prepared by the institutions themselves on the basis of the domains covered by each aspect of the scrutiny (see above). Strong emphasis is laid on outcome-oriented procedures. The internal report constitutes the first stage of the process. Then comes the visit from an external peer-review team. The latter analyses the documentation prepared by the institutions to prove they meet the requirements and spends some time discussing with groups of staff and students. In the subject review, the grading of each aspect of educational provision leads to a Graded Profile on a maximum score of 24 (QAA 2000b: 8) At the end of the visit, the review team orally presents its summative judgement derived from the different aspects of provision. After that, a subject review report is prepared by the team. It is made public and constitutes the main document of the process. The outcome of the audit procedure is a report prepared by the audit team. Comments are made on the approach of the institution to meet its responsibility for quality, the pertinence of the methods used by the institution to assess whether the responsibility is fulfilled and the level of confidence that can be placed on the validity and pertinence of the procedures used by the institution. This report is made public. Finally, participation in the subject-reviews and audits is compulsory.

Uses: wide publicity

The information collected during the institutional audits and the subject review is used both as a means for the institutions to improve their internal mechanisms for improving their educational provision and as a means to offer publicity about the standards of the HE institutions. This is particularly true for the subject review and is reflected in the approach of

the aspects of provision and their rating. The results of the subject review, although not directly linked with governmental funding[45], have a strong impact on institutional prestige and image in society. They are often included in newspaper reports on the quality of the different institutions.

Having depicted the current structure of the quality assurance policy domain, the chapter continues with the diachronic analysis of the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue and the stages it followed to adopt its current form.

5.6. Quality Assurance Policy in English Higher Education: The Diachronic View

During the last two decades, quality assurance policy in English HE has experienced a profound shift as regards its definition, the actors involved and its impact. From being taken largely for granted, quality assurance in HE has become a key political issue. The following pages reconstruct the process that lead to the current structure of the policy domain as depicted above.

5.6.1. The Policy Context

The narrative begins in the second half of the 1970s, in the aftermath of the first oil crisis. Like most of its of international counterparts, the British economy suffered the consequences of the crisis and experienced a sharp increase of the inflation rate and unemployment (Budge and McKay 1988: 7). The economic situation impacted negatively on education and the consensus inherited from the 1944 Education Act began to break down[46] (McVicar 1990: 131). In parallel, the relations between the universities and the political authorities were uneasy. Merrison recalls that in 1969 the CVCP dismissed a number of discussion points

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[45] However, it should be noted that the results of the subject reviews can influence Funding Council's decisions about whether to accept an institutional request to increase its student numbers in a particular area.

[46] In this regard, McVicar observes that discontent towards education grew from both sides of the political spectrum especially for failing to meet the needs of the economy. For the author, the economic crisis also resulted in education being negatively influenced by the need to revive private enterprise. On the one hand, tax reductions were introduced together with the beginning of a transfer of profitable parts of the public sector to the private sector. On the other hand, a "cultural revolution" had to be undertaken to reinforce cultural norms and values in favour of the private sector and education was seen as an important means to that end (McVicar 1990: 131-133).

from the then Minister for HE, Shirley Williams[47] (Merrison 1975). This made Merrison argue that

> "I think there is little doubt that at least the manner of their dismissal harmed the universities' stock of credit with the politicians and, I would guess, with the civil servants."
>
> Merrison 1975: 2

A similar situation happened a few years later, when the universities refused to engage in the "great debate" proposed by Shirley Williams' successor, Lord Crowther-Hunt (Merrison 1975: 2). These examples indicate that the universities were, in the mid-1970s, still enjoying a favourable position towards the political authorities, although sources of potential future conflicts could already be spotted. Eventually, the coming to power of the Conservative Party in 1979 was going to profoundly affect the overall landscape of HE, especially through the consequences of financial decisions and the organisational changes these required (Kogan and Hanney 2000: 148). It is within this general context that quality assurance was going to emerge as a political issue.

A look into the domain of HE indicates that by the early 1980s, and until well into the 1980s (Henkel 2000: 30), the system was an elitist one despite the expansion that followed the establishment of the binary system (see Table 5.1 and Figure 5.1). Kogan and Hanney (2000: 51; see also Bauer and Kogan 1997: 131) note that the age participation rate in HE throughout the UK did not fluctuate much above 15% all through the early period of the Conservative Government and only really began to increase by the end of the decade. This point is important for the purpose of the present research inasmuch as it illustrates that massification was not a predominant factor in the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue. Eventually, expansion did take place and resulted in the number of students in HE doubling during the period analysed in this study.

The patterns of funding were also modified during that period. As noted, the economic situation of the 1970s impacted badly on the universities. In 1973, the government refused to automatically upgrade their budgets in line with inflation and, more importantly, decided to abandon the traditional quinquennial grant (Scott 1995b: 10).

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[47] These proposals, presented in 13 points, were submitted to the CVCP (see Merrison 1975: 3-4, reproduced in Kogan and Hanney 2000: 147; see also Williams 1996: 166). The proposals envisaged a possible reduction in the unit costs or a limitation on the number of students following traditional courses and their transfer into different (shorter) courses leading to other types of qualifications.

FIGURE 5.2. INCREASE IN AGE PARTICIPATION INDEX IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION 1962-1994

TABLE REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

Source: Kogan and Hanney 2000: 51

TABLE 5.1. NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION 1965/66-1990/91(IN 000S)

TABLE REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

Source: 1965/66 to 1990/91: DfE 1993, Statistical Bulletin, no2, January, table 5; 1995/96: Kogan and Hanney 2000: 50; increases are own calculations.

The financial situation of the universities was not going to be any better under the first Thatcher administration. Rather, Margaret Thatcher came to power with the firm intention to intensify monetarism as the ideational basis for policy-making[48]. This led to a tight control of inflation, the reduction of public expenditure and the creation of markets or quasi-markets to replace state-controlled policy domains[49] (Budge and McKay 1988: 14-16; Mullard 1995:

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[48] In this respect, it is worth noting that monetarism had begun to emerge as a powerful opponent to keynesianism all through the second half of the 1970s, especially during the Heath and Callaghan administrations (Budge and McKay 1988: 13; Martin 1992: 124; 2.V.b.2). Within the Conservative Party, Sir Keith Joseph can be regarded as one of the personalities who most pushed to have the ideas of Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek implemented.

[49] More generally, the role of the state had to be reduced in favour of that of the individual in order to revive the entrepreneurial spirit. All these elements could be spotted in the 1979 Conservative Party Manifesto (Conservative Party Manifesto 1979: especially § 2) and, as far as de-nationalisation is concerned, especially after 1983 (Conservative Manifesto Party 1983, 1987).

110-111; Thompson 1986). In parallel to monetarist policies, the Conservative Government also characterised itself as a promoter of accountability and efficiency in all sectors of public activity, which implied the development of quantifiable outcomes. Its attitude towards established institutions and professional bodies was hostile. In addition, there was the firm intention to reduce the size of the civil service, together with its overall confidence and self-esteem (Kogan and Kogan 1983: 30). In HE, these elements were going to have long-ranging consequences. Although no specific policy orientations were observable in the 1979 Conservative Party Manifesto[50], one of the first measures adopted by the new government was the withdrawal of public subsidies to foreign students and the subsequent obligation for the universities to charge the entire cost of the education they provided them. This measure was soon followed by the decision to cut by 15% the funds allocated to HE for the period 1981-1984 (Kogan and Kogan 1983: 37-54; Williams 1990: 261; Williams 1997: 275). How they were dealt with in each side of the binary divide further promoted governmental intentions to look after their respective destinies[51]. The financial dimension was, thus, the first clear sign that things were changing in HE. More changes were going to take place in

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[50] In fact, the 1979 Conservative Party Manifesto put together education and HE. The emphasis was on standards. As regards HE itself, it stated that: "Much of our higher education in Britain has a world-wide reputation for its quality. We shall seek to ensure that this excellence is maintained. We are aware of the special problems associated with the need to increase the number of high-quality entrants to the engineering professions. We shall review the relationship between school, further education and training to see how better, use can be made of existing resources" (Conservative Party Manifesto 1979 § 5).

[51] The strategies implemented by the HE sector for facing the cuts in recurrent grants imposed by the government were quite different (Kogan and Kogan 1983: 55-71; Williams 1990: 261-263). In the autonomous sector, the UGC decided to reduce the number of new entrants so that the costs per student will not be too much affected. This strategy was implemented by defining a quota of students for each university. If an institution accepted more than its quota, it risked a reduction in its funding allocation. Another strategy was to spread the cuts unevenly among the institutions, which meant that some witnessed a reduction of 44% in their recurrent grants while others were losing only 6% (Jarratt 1985: 10). This strategy discredited the UGC in two ways (Williams 1995; Scott P. 1995b). First, many universities claimed that it had not defended their interests when accepting the cuts and splitting them - without any clear justification - among the different institutions. Second, the UGC also discredited itself in the eyes of the government. In effect, the latter did not expect the financial restrictions to result in a decline of the number of students but in a reduction of the cost per student. In addition, the government was also concerned by lack of public accountability in a body that was seen as too close to the universities. An (in)direct outcome of the way the UGC handled the 1981 cuts was the setting up of the Croham Committee in 1984. It reported in 1987 and recommended the abolition of the UGC and its replacement by a University Grants Council with the obligation, among others, to "collect, examine and publish comparative information about the universities" (Sizer 1990: 18; see also Croham 1987).
In contrast to the universities, the public sector reacted quite differently. Local authorities decided that the best way to limit the actual loss was to increase the number of students entering their institutions (Williams 1990: 261). And so they did. However, the lack of a coordinating body in this sector was a cause of concern for the government. As a result, the NAB was established in 1982. The control of the polytechnics was still in the hands of the different local authorities but now mechanisms for central co-ordination and funding were also present.

the coming years, especially when Keith Joseph was appointed as Secretary of State for Education.

Between July 1982 and September 1983, Joseph wrote to the UGC and the NAB asking them to formulate proposals for the future of the two sectors. In an attempt to anticipate future developments, the universities established a working group on "universities' methods and procedures for maintaining and monitoring academic quality and standards", better known as the Academic Standards Group or as the Reynolds Committee, after its Chairman Prof. Philip Reynolds. This group was going to play a crucial role in the construction of the debates on quality and standards in the autonomous sector and in the claims for the universities to retain control of the instruments that would be developed. Its establishment was one of the first reactive strokes of the universities to pre-empt the possible intrusion of external bodies (Williams 1992: 143), although doubts can be expressed as to the extent to which the government really took these efforts seriously (1.V.a.3; 2.V.b.2)[52].

The funding bodies of the two sectors reported in September 1984 in two different documents that included a common statement. The UGC's response (UGC 1984) addressed quality assurance policy by endorsing the view, expressed a few months earlier in the Leverhulme Report (SRHE 1983: 13-15), that responsibility for academic standards had to remain with the universities. However, it rejected the idea, also present in the Leverhulme investigation, that the universities should set up an academic review body to meet the requirements for external scrutiny of their teaching. By contrast, the UGC proposed to improve the external examiner system as the principal procedure to ensure that academic standards across the system were maintained[53] (UGC 1984: 20-21 § 6). In this perspective, it recalled the efforts made by the sector, through the appointment of the Reynolds Committee, to look into the issue seriously and welcomed the publication of a first *Code of Practice* for the external examiner system (CVCP 1984).

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52 This reference indicates that the information was gathered during an interview. The coding system can be found in Appendix 2.

53 The report argued that: "The established mechanism for securing comparable standards in academic awards is the appointment of external examiners. Universities regard this as effective, and it is extremely economical. Nevertheless reasonable criticisms have been expressed, arising mainly from the variety of practice in the selection and responsibilities of external examiners and from doubts about their influence on the teaching and assessment of students. Operation of the CVCP's code of practice would, we believe, meet these criticisms." (UGC 1984: 21 § 6.7)

The response of the public sector was different (NAB 1984). It outlined the need to set up a system that would allow quantification and measurement of institutional performance. The system would be based on external assessment reviews (NAB 1984: 2 § Cvi) and would emphasise accountability to be developed alongside larger operational autonomy (NAB 1984: 2 § Cix). The NAB Report also referred to the future publication of the Lindop Report (see below). Two points of major importance were put forward. The first emphasised the need to set up differentiated procedures of quality assurance that could fit the very diverse institutions of the public sector. The second emphasised the need to continue with the then existing external control based on peer review and not on the external examiner system[54].

An understanding of the emphasis put on the provision of quantifiable information can be found in the financial situation of the public sector. The NAB was established to provide better co-ordination in the funding of the public sector. In addition, it considered as one of its missions the defence of the financial situation of its sector (Williams 1990: 261), which implied asking for a larger share of the available resources for HE, especially the expenditure per student. The development of quantifiable outcomes can consequently be seen as a move from the public sector to show what was done with public funds, thus meeting the government's accountability requirements.

The road towards quantifiable outcomes as a response to accountability and efficiency was brought one step further by the publication of the *Steering Committee for Efficiency Studies in Universities*, chaired by Sir Alex Jarratt, a crucial document in the construction of quality assurance policy (Jarratt 1985). Among its recommendations, the most important for our purpose are the development of PIs in the universities and the need for strategic planning and clearly stated aims and objectives (Jarratt 1985: § 3.30). Jarratt's report reflected in the university sector the general political atmosphere towards greater accountability of the HE institutions and improved performance in terms of economy and efficiency. In addition, it was also committed to require effectiveness in the achievement of pre-defined objectives at the different levels. To be achieved, this double requirement needed a response based on

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54 As stated in the report: "Whatever the outcome [of the Lindop Report], the crucial importance of maintaining a system of external quality assurance of courses based on peer group assessment must be re-affirmed. An external examiner system on its own is not adequate, and a national framework of monitoring and review is much to be preferred" (NAB 1984: 26 § 7.14).

quantifiable elements[55]. The universities could not remain silent. In collaboration with the Grants Committee, the CVCP set up a joint group to further examine the issue of quantifiable outcomes and their potential link to funding policies (CVCP 1986b, 1987a, b, 1988).

As regards the public sector, the views expressed by the NAB were not wholly endorsed by report of the Lindop Committee[56] (Lindop 1985). The latter acknowledged the work of the CNAA, although aspects on the excess of bureaucracy were highlighted. The report of the Lindop Committee is important inasmuch as it would lead the CNAA to modify its position towards validation in the public sector. Some changes had already taken place in the late 1970s (CNAA 1975, 1979) and Lindop brought them a step further (CNAA 1986). In 1988, an accreditation procedure was introduced by which the CNAA delegated to the accredited institutions the right to approve and review courses leading to its awards. The institutions had to prove that they had procedures to ensure the quality of the courses and that these procedures included peer review (Brennan 1990: 107). At the moment of the coming into force of the Education Reform Act, this was another move towards greater autonomy for the institutions of the public sector.

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55 Jarratt noted that: "there [was] a recognised need for reliable and consistent PIs. These need[ed] to be developed urgently for universities as a whole and for individual universities as an integral part of their planning and resource allocation process" (Jarratt 1985: 22 § 3.43g). Which implied that: "[A] range of performance indicators should be developed, covering inputs and outputs and designed for *use* both within individual universities and for making comparisons between institutions." According to the Report, these performance indicators had to play a role in the allocation of resources among institutions and be developed alongside more qualitative methods (Jarratt 1985: 19 § 3.32f). The report proposed three types of indicators: a) internal PIs (market position of the university, quality of teaching, attraction of postgraduate students and research funds, graduate rates and classes of degrees...); b) external PIs (acceptability of graduates and postgraduates in the labour market, publications and citations of members of staff, papers presented at conferences, reputation of the institutions judged by external peers...) and c) operating PIs (unit costs, staff/students ratio, class sizes, library stock and computers availability...) (Jarratt 1985: 36 § 5.4c).

56 The Lindop Committee had been set up by the Government to look into ways of maintaining and improving academic standards in the public sector. The objective was to evaluate how well degree-validating bodies were discharging their responsibilities (Lindop 1985: 1 § 1.1). Three main directions for the future of validation procedures were put forward (Lindop 1985: 43-55). The first was simply to expand the responsibilities of the institutions that were externally validated while, at the same time, maintaining the system of external validation for all the institutions. The second proposal was to abolish the CNAA and to grant degree-awarding powers to all the institutions that so wished. Finally, an intermediate position was formulated based on the possibility offered to the institutions to apply to the Secretary of State for powers to award degrees. Those institutions that did not wish to do so or were not successful would be externally validated while still gaining more responsibilities and delegated powers. It is worth noting that the Lindop Report recommended, among others, to make the procedures for course validation in the public sector more similar to those used in the autonomous sector. This was justified by the fact that the public sector institutions were able to set and maintain their own standards (Lindop 1985: 13 § 3.23, see also § 8.6).

The publication of the Green Paper *Development of Higher Education into the 1990s* in 1985 further emphasised the importance of the quality issue (DES 1985). The Green Paper recalled that standards remained a key priority for the government and reiterated that institutions were primarily responsible for preserving and enhancing quality (DES 1985: 4 § 1.7 and 28 § 6.11). In addition, good management was not seen to be dependent only on the efficient use of resources but also on the effectiveness of the results that were achieved, which implied the formulation and subsequent use of PIs (DES 1985: 30-31 § 7.5). In this sense, what had been general discussion in previous years was now firmly on the political agenda: quantifiable information was a requirement.

The Green Paper was also important as regards the organisation of the public sector and how it compared with that of the universities. As noted, the former was under the control of the LEAs whose location within the structure of HE made them a political buffer between the central government and the polytechnics. However, the polytechnics were increasingly criticising the tight control they were subjected to and their lack of autonomy (Jones and Kiloh 1987: 113). In this respect, the Green Paper persistently opposed the universities to the polytechnics (for instance DES 1985: 29 § 6.15) and remarked that in contrast to the polytechnics, universities were not "subject to external scrutiny of their procedures for setting and maintaining academic standards" (DES 1985: 28 § 6.13). Divergences between the two sides of HE were becoming more and more apparent, especially as regards accountability and quality. The divergent views between the sectors were put forward by several interviewees who noted how opposition emerged between the sectors and how the government played one sector against the other. One interviewee recalled that informal pressures on the universities were justified because they lacked, at the time, any mechanisms of external accountability, whereas the polytechnics were under the scrutiny of the CNAA and the HMI (1.V.a.1). Consistent with this point of view was the impression of another informant:

> "The perception was that the polytechnics provided better value for money and were certainly much more responsive to government policies. The consequence of this was that the pre-1992 universities, represented by the CVCP, came under pressure to demonstrate that they were achieving value for money and that they were maintaining academic standards."
>
> 2.V.b.2

In fact, future developments in HE and in the domain of quality assurance would continue to be marked by the sectoral opposition. To a substantial extent, the opposition reflected the

different ethos of the two sectors and the positions they were adopting regarding governmental policy orientations, especially as regards issues of expansion.

The period between the publication of the Green Paper and that of the White Paper *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* two years later (DES 1987a) was marked by a further counter-offensive of the autonomous sector as regards the request for quantifiable information on its performance and standards. There was a growing concern that something had to be done. Governmental pressures and demands could not just be acknowledged but needed action (1.V.a.1). First came *The Future of the Universities* (CVCP 1986a), where the CVCP stated that

> "The character and quality of education in British universities were not created by Government or Parliament. They evolved within the universities themselves. The universities are confident that their academic standards are equal to the highest in the world but they also accept that their procedures for maintaining and monitoring those standards should be made more public."
>
> CVCP 1986a: 11 § 3.17

The CVCP was recognising that there were severe governmental pressures and that something had to be done quickly. In this regard, it recalled that universities were also subject to their own type of external scrutiny, via the external examiner system, professional accreditation bodies, the UGC, research councils and lay members (CVCP 1986a: 11 § 3.18). In addition, as noted, working groups had been set up to discuss both the issue of academic standards and the recommendations of the Jarratt Report. Among the documents that were produced, the most influential was certainly the first report of the Academic Standards Group: the Reynolds Report on *Academic Standards in Universities* (Reynolds 1986). The report stressed the need to set up internal criteria for the management of quality of university services, criteria that all the institutions should adopt in order to permit comparisons and, consequently, to facilitate funding decisions. To that end, a code of practice was developed that all universities had to adopt[57]. However, there was no mention of any external body that would come into the institutions and look at how they ensured quality and standards.

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[57] It is worth noting that these views were in contradiction with those expressed by the CVCP/UGC joint working group for whom the objective of quantifiable indicators was to provide information to be used by the universities for their own management. There was no intention that they would be used by the UGC or any other body for external purposes, i.e. funding decisions.

The elements discussed so far highlight the governmental concerns for quality assurance, efficiency and accountability and the dissimilar responses from the sectors. All these elements crystallised in the 1987 White Paper *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* (DES 1987a). Published prior to the 1987 elections, it was a step further in the process of making HE more responsive to the demands of the economy and society (Dennison 1989: 90; Brennan and Shah 1994: 304). The White Paper proposed to put an end to lifetime academic tenure and, more importantly for the present study, to separate the polytechnics from LEAs and to abolish the NAB. The White Paper referred to a study on measures to improve the management of the public sector (DES 1987b) and pointed out the difficulty for the polytechnics to set up the relevant structures to ensure their good management. The reason for these difficulties was that:

> "the good management of polytechnics and colleges [was] inhibited by the excessive engagement in their affairs of local authorities exploiting their role as the formal employer of staff and the overseer of budgetary and purchasing matters."
>
> DES 1987a: 23 § 3.29

Consequently, the White Paper proposed to transfer the control of the public sector institutions to a new body, the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC). By so doing, the polytechnics were granted corporate status, which was not far from what the universities were enjoying. They were still a step behind in relation to degree-awarding powers and full recognition as equal to the universities, but this would not last for much longer.

The White Paper and the subsequent Education Reform Act, adopted one year later confirmed the increasing role of the government in HE policy. The principal orientations underlined the continuing marketisation of British HE both in practice and in the terminology used (Williams 1997). The increasing control of HE was most explicit in the transformation of the funding bodies. The UGC was abolished and replaced by a Universities Funding Council (UFC) whose members, including the Chairman, were appointed by the Secretary of State, with the subsequent consequences for the definition of general policies (Griffith 1990: 98; Williams 1990: 263). By so doing, the government was trying to intensify its influence over the autonomous sector, while at the same time reducing the differences with the public sector. In effect, similar arrangements were made for the public sector. As a result, the funding patterns were developing alongside concerns about accountability and efficiency, and so was the structure of quality assurance policy. In this regard, four areas were pointed

out where governmental scrutiny would ensure that mechanisms did exist to secure quality: academic standards, quality of teaching, students' achievement and quality of research (DES 1987a: 16 §3.5).

This time, the message was explicit and the universities understood it well. They had to do something to ensure the quality of the teaching they provided if they did not want to see a model imposed on them (Williams 1992: 143; 3.V.d.1). One first step was taken by the CVCP. In 1989, it acknowledged receipt of an updated report from the re-established Academic Standards Group (CVCP 1989), which led to the setting up of the AAU in October 1990. The AAU would ensure that universities had introduced adequate procedures for assuring the quality of their standards and of the degrees they were awarding. The establishment of the AAU was an important recognition of external pressures by the university sector. An interviewee remarked that it was "as far as the universities would have accepted to go" (2.V.b.5) regarding external scrutiny and was already seen as an intrusion in their institutional autonomy. For instance, the AAU was not allowed to enter a university but had to be invited to do so. In addition, it lacked any powers of sanction, which largely reduced the impact of its work. The AAU carried out institutional audits in four areas[58] and used a methodology based on a combination of internal and external procedures (AAU 1992: 9-12; 1.V.a.5).

Like their counterparts in the autonomous sector, the polytechnics were also experiencing important developments in quality assurance policy by the end of the 1980s. As noted, the CNAA had modified its validation mechanisms and was now working on the basis of accreditation procedures. In addition, HMI adopted a "fitness-for-purpose" approach to quality as developed in the 1987 White Paper[59]. Its task was to assess whether the organisation of the study programme, its management, the resources available as well as the way the courses were delivered were appropriate to meet the aims and objectives the

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58 These were: a) the universities' mechanisms for quality assurance in provision and design of courses and degree programmes; b) the universities' mechanisms for quality assurance in teaching and communications methods; c) the universities' mechanisms for quality assurance in relation to academic staff and d) universities' mechanisms for quality assurance in taking account of external examiners' reports, students' views on courses and views of external bodies (AAU 1992: 8).

59 Interest in fitness-for-purpose was also present in the 1990 Warnock Report to the PCFC on the quality of teaching (PCFC 1990). For Warnock, it was crucial that the aims and objectives stated by the different institutions, always consistent with the general objectives of the PCFC, were met.

institution had stated. In the procedures developed by the Inspectorate, individual study programmes were compared with one another (Harvey *Ed.* 1993: 143), which required the development of quantitative indicators.

The need for quantifiable information was already present in the proposals the NAB submitted to Keith Joseph in 1984 (see above). In line with what was being done in the universities, the PCFC set up a working group chaired by Alfred Morris. The group reported in June 1990, amidst strong emphasis on cost reduction and efficiency gains. PIs[60] had to be developed in order not only to demonstrate that the public sector was managed properly but also to highlight what public sector's institutions provided in return of the funds they received (Morris 1990 § 1.2).

Some internal problems could, however, be spotted. Whereas the PCFC was meeting the political requirements for accountability and efficiency, the CNAA was in an increasingly delicate position (Williams 1995: 24). Not only did it oppose governmental pressures that the results of its course assessments should be taken into account by the PCFC to finance the institutions, but also it was losing part of its powers in the accreditation procedures as a result of the Lindop Report (see above).

By the early 1990s, thus, two traditions, indeed philosophies, in quality assurance policy could be clearly observed from each side of the binary line. To put it briefly, universities had since the beginning resisted any external form of scrutiny of their activity except for some professional areas such as medical education. Some moves had been made to show that they were taking governmental concerns seriously and the setting up of the AAU was the ultimate attempt to pre-empt any form of scrutiny external to the system. Interviewees, however, recalled that all these moves were not considered to be sufficient by the government (1.V.a.3; 2.V.b.2). In addition, the fact that the AAU's work was based on institutional audit did not meet the requirements of subject-based assessment where information could be drawn on the

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60 The Morris Report offered the following definition of PIs: "Performance indicators are statistics, ratios, costs and other forms of information which illuminate or measure progress in achieving the mission and the corresponding aims and objectives of the PCFC or of a college or polytechnic which it funds" (Morris 1990: 7 § 2). The report mentioned that an annual performance report should be published by the institutions with selected institutional indicators and including the report of the Board of Governors, the audited accounts and other related information on financial issues, summary of research activities and information on students (Morris 1990: 10 § 8). Four sets of macro PIs were presented but these, as Morris recalled, had to be used with caution and in combination with other kinds of procedures (Morris 1990: 8-9 § 6). By way of reply, the PCFC charged its Steering Group on Statistical Information to refine the indicators proposed by Morris (PCFC 1992: 2 § 11).

performance of the different departments. A clear sign of the mistrust of the government towards what the AAU and the universities were doing was the publication of the 1991 White Paper with a clear agenda for quality before the AAU had published its first reports (1V.a.4).

By contrast, the institutions of the public sector had gone through rather different experiences. They had been subjected to two different types of external scrutiny: the CNAA's course validation and, later, accreditation, and HMI's inspections of teaching and learning whose judgements had informed external assessment regimes from the PCFC. They were used to external scrutiny and, to a large extent, were convinced that they were university-level institutions.

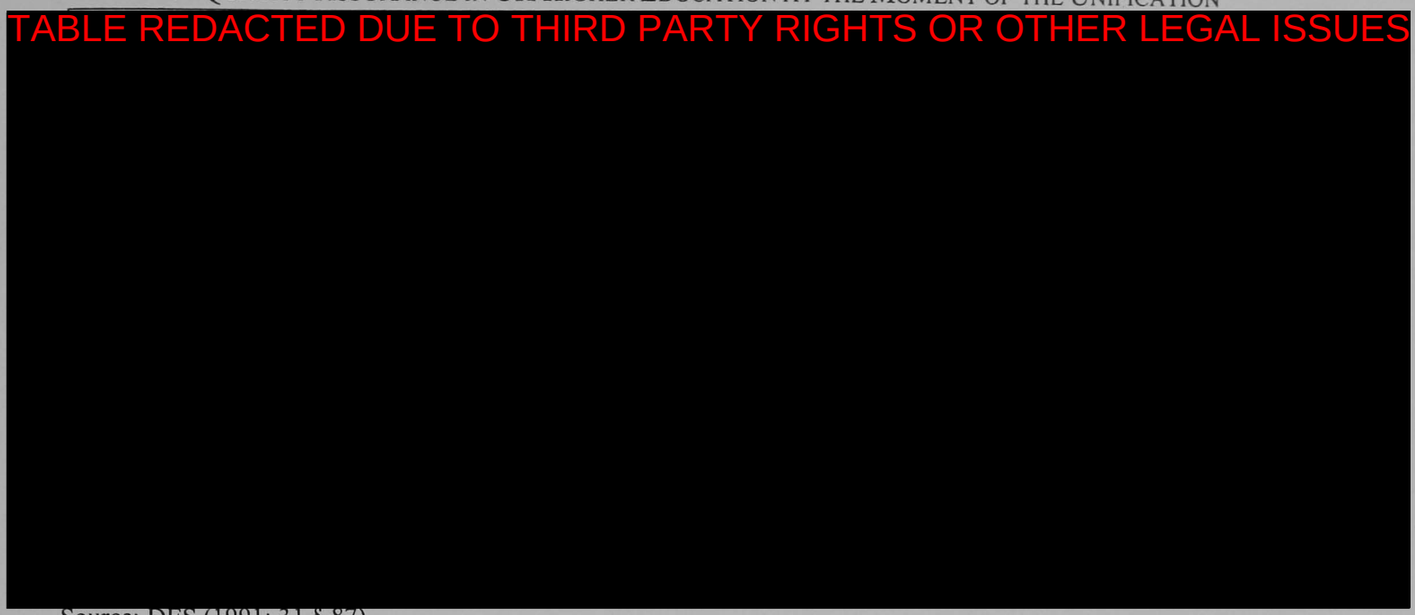
These different histories reflected deeper trends. They reflected the differentiated status that ruled the two sectors, thus highlighting the outcomes of the management of the autonomy by the traditional universities and the closer links of the public sector institutions. But to a large extent too, the situation present at the dawn of the 1992 *Further and Higher Education Act* was also the consequence of wider changes, changes that had affected most of the British public sector. These changes had at their heart the cult of efficiency and quality.

5.6.2. Towards the Unification of Quality Assurance

The 1991 White Paper *Higher Education a New Framework* (DES 1991) unveiled the plans for abolishing the binary divide. Four Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCs) replaced the UFC and the PCFC. Funding procedures were unified, but quality assurance policy remained divided between the HE sector and governmental agencies (see Figure 5.3).

The White Paper acknowledged that responsibility for the quality of teaching primarily rested with the institutions themselves. However, the government had to ensure that public funds were used appropriately, consequently implying the need for some kind of accountability (DES 1991: 24 § 58; 1.V.f.13; 3.V.d.2). Central to the concern for accountability was the need to receive "improved information" so that students and potential employers could directly benefit from the competition among the institutions (2.V.e.15).

FIGURE 5.3. QUALITY ASSURANCE IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION AT THE MOMENT OF THE UNIFICATION



Source: DES (1991: 31 § 87)

In this regard, the White Paper recalled that quality had to be related to quantifiable outcomes. It thus acknowledged the development of PIs and their potential links with future policies, while recognising the need to combine them with more qualitative information that would include the quality of teaching and learning as well as the infrastructure within which they were provided (DES 1991: 29 § 80-81). From this perspective, the White Paper distinguished between two principal orientations in quality assurance, audit and assessment, to be operated separately by the sector for the audits[61], and the new Funding Councils for the assessments[62].

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61 The White Paper defined quality audit as "a means of checking that relevant systems and structures within an institutions support its key teaching mission" (DES 1991: 26 § 67). Its purpose was twofold.

- "To provide information, for public understanding and reassurance, about the methods used by institutions to discharge their responsibilities for their academic quality and standards, and to offer judgements on the effectiveness of those methods.
- To help institutions by furnishing them with provisional agenda for the improvement and enhancement of the quality of their education provision" (HEQC and HEFCE 1994: 1-2 § 6).

62 These were understood as "an external review of, and judgement about, the quality of teaching and learning in institutions" (DES 1991: 24 § 60). The 1991 White Paper and the 1992 Act made clear that quality assessment had to be taken up by the Funding Councils. As the present study concentrates on England, reference is only made to the Higher Education Funding for England (HEFCE). The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act made the HEFCE responsible: "to secure that provision [was] made for assessing the quality of education provided in institutions for whose activities [it] provide[d], or [was] considering providing, financial support" (HMSO 1992: Section 70). This general statement was followed by a number of more specific directions. For instance, the HEFCE had to provide information to the government and to those to whom education was provided: "It will be for the Council to determine the assessment approach to be adopted, in consultation with institutions and drawing on experience from the pilot assessments already completed or under way. The Council will need, (…), to ensure that the outcomes of assessment visits are in a form which can be used to inform funding allocation. Reports of visits should be published. The Council should seek to ensure that serious shortcomings identified in reports are addressed by institutions, and monitored by the Council" (HEFCE 1994b: 3 § 10b). The assessments were to be based on a mix of

In England, the HEFCE designed its own methodology and defined its mission in the domain of quality assurance as follows:

- "To ensure that all the institutions for which the HEFCE provides funding is of satisfactory quality or better, and to ensure speedy rectification of unsatisfactory quality.
- To encourage improvement in the quality of education through the publication of assessment reports and an annual report.
- To inform funding and reward excellence."

HEFCE 1993: 4 § 5

The most important consequence of the White Paper and the subsequent *Further and Higher Education Act* was the abolition of the binary divide in HE. This decision was a logical step after the early moves of the mid- and late 1980s. The unification of the system of HE is of crucial importance for the question of quality assurance. As noted earlier, the autonomous and public sectors of HE had been confronted all through the 1980s with governmental pressures of different kinds. First, came the cuts in the recurrent grants of 1981, then the claims from the then Secretary of State to ensure that quality and standards were being kept up and, more importantly, to ensure that the funds invested on each side of the binary line were used appropriately. As noted, the way the two sectors responded to these demands diverged in several regards. In parallel, concerns had progressively emerged from the polytechnics regarding their position in the system of HE as a whole. The NAB wanted a larger stake of the funds allocated to HE, especially in the light of what they were offering (Williams 1990: 264). In addition, there were claims about the actual status of the institutions. Altogether this situation meant that, when the two sectors merged, more than one cause for animosity had to be allayed, as noted by several interviewees (1.V.c.1; 1.V.f.5). These difficulties prevailed in the early years of the unified system, which impacted negatively on the quality assurance policy domain (1.V.c.1; 1.V.c.6). One can argue that most of the difficulties arose from the underestimation of the different traditions the two

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internal self-assessment and external peer-reviews. The institutions were responsible for carrying on internal self-assessment exercises that would be complemented by statistical indicators whose nature was not specified. On the basis of their reports, each institution would claim a particular grade, i.e. excellent, satisfactory and unsatisfactory. The HEFCE had to assess whether the grade was appropriate in the light of the report and to set up on-site visits to a number of institutions that would encompass all those claiming an excellent or an unsatisfactory status (HEQC and HEFCE 1994: 3 § 15, 17).
This framework was modified in 1995. The qualitative claims for grades were abandoned in favour of a profile system where six core areas of provision (curriculum, teaching; student progression; student support; learning resources; and quality assurance and enhancement) were graded on a one to four point scale. In addition, the selected visiting system was replaced by "universal visiting", thus implying that all institutions were externally assessed by a team of peer-reviewers. The HEFCE accompanied all these changes by more detailed guidelines on the preparation and drafting of the internal self-assessment reports (HEFCE 1994a, 1994b; see also HEFCE 1995b: 13-15).

sectors were coming from and how each side of the binary line perceived the other. From this underestimation emerged rivalry, which, eventually, would favour the objectives of the government.

It was, therefore, in a somewhat negative atmosphere that the two sectors were going to collaborate. The prime objective was to set up a coherent body of new, old and historical universities. The CVCP had to find a new identity, a new way of amalgamating different institutions and enhancing trust (2.V.e.2). The issue of quality was rising high on the political agenda, especially after the DES had made the HEFCE responsible for the assessment of courses in HE. The newly unified sector had to react. Which it did by the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) in 1993.

In several regards, the HEQC was a hybrid body, which eventually would be fatal. First, it brought together the different activities that had been carried out on each side of the former binary line (2.V.e.11; 1.V.a.10). It was composed of three divisions: for audit - based on the AAU's previous work - for quality enhancement – after discussions with the CNAA - and a career transfer and access division (Harvey *Ed.* 1993: 121). Another sign of the hybrid nature of the HEQC was that both its Chairman and Chief Executive came from the public sector, bringing with them the tradition of external scrutiny referred to at different points of our narrative. The relationship between the Heads of the CVCP and the HEQC did not go as well as might have been expected. This element cannot easily be corroborated by referring to the literature but several interviewees who were involved in the debates have pointed it out. Some mentioned that the CVCP was "ambivalent" about the HEQC, which it found too bureaucratic and too independent (1.V.c.2). The misunderstanding referred to above was clearly expressed by the same informant:

> "Basically, the CVCP did not understand the HEQC point of view because the HEQC came out of the CDP, the polytechnic side of the higher education sector. The old universities never understood the role of a central body in these matters, acting on behalf of the institutions; they were always very suspicious [against] central bodies."
>
> 1.V.c.6

Other interviewees pointed out how difficult it was to get "a clear line on quality" from the CVCP, itself resulting from deficiencies in the management of the new CVCP (1.V.f.6). Still others, however, remarked that the HEQC rapidly developed its own views on quality while:

> "(...) some members of the CVCP [...] thought the HEQC ought to do exactly what CVCP told it to do and nothing else."
>
> 2.V.e.9

The principal point of disagreement between the two bodies rested on the types of procedures that had to be developed. Pre-1992 institutions believed in what had been done by the AAU and did not want to go any further. There seem to have been fears that more intrusive types of procedures would be implemented (1.V.a.10; 2.V.e.7), which would have been highly unwelcome among the old universities. Consequently, the structure of quality assurance policy that resulted from the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act cut the procedures and those responsible for their control in two. Institutions through the HEQC on the one hand and the HEFCE, through its Quality Assessment Division, were going to take responsibility to meet governmental requirements.

However, the binary divide in quality assurance was not to last forever. Hardly two years after the coming into force of the 1992 Act, the then State Secretary for Education and Employment, Gillian Shephard, asked the HEFCE's Chairman to formulate proposals and to consult with representative bodies on potential ways to merge the two processes of quality assurance (Brown 1997a: 9). Two factors can be brought forward to help understand this *volte face*. The first was the multiplication of administrative work universities and colleges of HE were asked to perform under the then existing system (3.V.d.2; 1.V.f.11). These were overburdened with the audits, the quality assessment exercises and accreditation by external professional bodies. In parallel, critics also targeted the methodological framework used by the HEFCE in the teaching assessment exercises (THES 05.11.1995).

It was not long before debates on how the new system should be framed began. They opposed the CVCP, the HEFCE and the government, leaving the HEQC largely aside. An explanation for this has not been found in the different documents consulted during this study. However, the information collected from the interviews supports the views expressed earlier concerning the heavy atmosphere that reigned among the universities, especially the pre-1992 ones, regarding "their" quality council. The latter was seen as "too pushy, too political, too ambitious [which] was partly because of the people in charge" (1.V.a.11). This view is shared by another interviewee who recalls that:

> "It seemed to me that the HEQC was, on the one hand, acting as an independent agent developing its own procedures and, on the other hand, arguing that it was [correct] to leave quality matters in the hands of the HEQC because it represented the universities. But many

> members of the CVCP did not think so. They thought that what they were developing was a rather intrusive way that would not satisfy government and was not satisfying them."
>
> 2.V.e.13

With the HEQC somewhat isolated, but not totally absent, the CVCP and the HEFCE soon made their intentions public as regard the future organisation of the quality assurance policy domain. Both agreed on the need to have a single body responsible for the whole domain. Not so consensual, however, were the policy instruments the new system was to be built upon. The CVCP favoured audit-driven procedures, as operated by the HEQC, as the best means to meet the concerns of the political authorities (THES 13.01.1995). However, in an early submission to the Secretary of State, the HEFCE rejected this view on the grounds that some institutions that performed well in audits could also perform badly in assessment procedures (THES 31.03.1995). In addition, as one interviewee recalls, course assessments were one of the only means by which the DES could defend the amounts spent on HE before the Parliament (3.V.d.2). In a letter to the Secretary of State, the CVCP's Chairman pointed out the lack of interest the HEFCE had shown for the universities' point of view. He consequently refused to endorse the Funding Council's proposals and announced the preparation of an alternative document on the future of quality assurance and the shape it had to take (THES 07.04.1995).

The apparent opposition between the CVCP and the HEFCE seemed to be partially lifted in late April 1995 when Kenneth Edwards, Chairman of the CVCP, wrote to the HEFCE's Chief Executive (THES 05.05.1995). In his letter, Edwards proposed the creation of a single agency jointly owned by the universities and the Funding Council. The idea was to set up a structure in which the institutions would not have pre-defined procedures imposed on them but could negotiate the best way of evaluating teaching and learning on a subject basis.
At that stage, the battle moved to the opposition between quality enhancement and accountability and highlighted the internal divergences in the university sector. The HEQC defended the idea of institutional autonomy and formative procedures with no link with funding decisions. John Stoddart, then Chairman of the HEQC was quoted as saying, regarding the letter sent to the HEFCE, that it:

> "deal[t] mainly with assessment and public accountability. It does not talk about how a single agency would tackle quality enhancement, standards and the granting of degree awarding powers."
>
> THES 05.05.1995.

Similar views were shared by the then Vice-Chancellor of Oxford Brooks University, who considered the letter as going "too far in the direction of assessment" (THES 05.05.1995).
On the other hand, the HEFCE appeared more inclined to summative-driven approaches to quality assurance. This position was in line with the obligations imposed on the Funding Council by the 1992 Act. The formative-driven approach to quality assurance defended by the HEQC could not therefore be accepted because it would "compromise public accountability, confidence in public information and any future link with funding" (THES 07.04.1995). The position of the HEQC was to defend institutional autonomy and formative-driven instruments. The former was based on the fact the institutions should not be imposed a pre-defined system but could negotiate the modalities of subject evaluations with the new agency. Formative-driven objectives were supported through the emphasis put on the need to develop quality enhancement procedures. However, in the early proposals to set up the new arrangements for quality assurance, the CVCP seemed to abandon the idea of formative evaluations to better defend that of institutional autonomy. In a letter to its members, the Chairman of the CVCP was quoted as saying that he would express to the HEFCE:

> "(...) strong support for a new, single, integrated process to replace the current, separate visits for assessment and for audit and our [the CVCP's] belief that the focus should be on internally-generated review which are arranged to provide public accountability."
> THES 19.05.1995.

In May 1995, the HEQC published a discussion paper outlining its own views regarding the setting up of a single system of quality assurance (HEQC 1995). It recalled that the universities were already accountable to society and already had internal instruments for quality assurance. Any new system would have to support the existing procedures rather than set up new ones. The bureaucratisation of quality assurance was also targeted. The universities needed to pay greater attention to the quality of education itself, something they had tended to underestimate in favour of meeting the requirements of the instruments themselves[63] (HECQ 1995: § 5).

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63 The system proposed by HEQC was based on three principles (HEQC 1995: § 2):
- "provide reassurance that the educational provision for which each institution takes responsibility meets a minimum acceptable standard;
- provide information about the quality and standards of the programmes and awards which institutions offer;
- produce lasting quality improvement through the promotion of innovation and development"

It proposed internal reviews of programme providers and external institutional evaluations (HEQC 1995: § 8-13). On the one hand, internal reviews would aim at ensuring that the programmes each provider was responsible for meeting the stated objectives and were in accordance with the general missions of the

This document was hardly considered. Rather, the HEFCE proposed a system based on three main elements:

- a *Process of Quality Assurance* to be set up, in consultation with the institutions, by the HEFCE. It would be introduced in 1996/1997 and would complete the first round of subject assessments. The HEQC audits would cease in 1996 and the PQA would have powers to launch new ones.
- a *Quality Assurance Agency* would take over the second cycle of quality assessment from 2000.
- a *Joint Planning Group* to be set up to discuss the shape of the QAA.

THES 16.06.1995

The CVCP rejected these proposals (THES 16.06.1995). The opposition principally crystallised around who was to be responsible for running the subjects/programme assessments. For the HEFCE, the assessments had to be run by external teams with members from the department assessed. For the CVCP, they had to be monitored by an internal team composed of some external reviewers. In addition, fears were expressed concerning the loss of institutional autonomy and the lack of confidence in the Funding Council's work both as regards its rigour and its concerns for quality enhancement. Leslie Wagner, vice-chancellor of Leeds Metropolitan University, mentioned that:

> "The HEFCE proposals ignore quality improvement. They are concerned solely with inspection. Most gains from the past will be lost and in the long run, quality will suffer."
>
> THES 23.06.1995

As a result, the CVCP submitted its own proposal to the Secretary of State (CVCP 1995). It agreed with the HEFCE's idea of setting up a new independent agency but considered that more was needed. It pointed out that the new system would need to address three different issues. First, an agreement had to be made between the agency, the institutions and the professional bodies. Second, each institution would agree with the agency and the HEFCE on a programme by programme, subject by subject basis. Finally the third dimension stressed the importance of review quality in relation to institutional objectives through procedures drawing on the quality audits[64] (CVCP 1995: 4-5).

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institution and the developments in the discipline. The reviews would cover three areas: the delivery of teaching and learning; the standards of students' achievement considered as indispensable to obtain the degree, and quality management. These internal reviews would have an external dimension through the fact that at least two external assessors would be involved in the assessment team. On the other hand, institution-wide audits would be periodically undertaken by the new agency with the objective of ensuring that each institution really was meeting its stated objectives and that it could continue to do so in the future.

64 As far as the methodology is concerned, the CVCP developed also three different proposals. Institution-wide audits would be based on internal self-evaluations combined with periodical external reviews by the agency that would eventually lead to the publication of a report. The process, based on the then existing

At the beginning of the summer of 1995, the Secretary of State had on her table two conflicting proposals for the future organisation of quality assurance. Two opposing philosophies of the best way to organise a single system of quality assurance or, more precisely, to *control* it and to impose the principal norms and values that would guide the definition of the objectives and the ways to achieve them.

By the end of September, the Secretary of State informed the CVCP's new Chairman, Gareth Roberts, that the proposals submitted by the universities would form the basis for an agreed solution (THES 29.09.1995). As a result, a joint group was set up in December 1995 to discuss in more detail how the single system was to be organised. The Joint Planning Group for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (JPG) was composed of representatives from the Funding Councils, the CVCP – with the Chairman of HEQC - the SCOP, the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals and the Standing Conference of Principals as well as from assessors of the DfEE, the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department and the Welsh Office Education Department. The Group's mandate was to formulate proposals for an integrated system of quality assurance run by a single body (JPG 1996a: 1 § 4). It worked all through the winter and in April 1996 published an intermediary report (JPG: 1996a 3-6 § 10-33). The later was strongly criticised by the universities. They pointed to the still important burden of work they would have to carry were the proposal brought forward (THES 17.05.1996). These critics had some effect on the Group's reflections. Its final report, (JPG 1996b) emphasised the "integrated approach of quality assurance" to be operated by the new agency. The latter would take responsibility for:

> "(...) all the functions of the HEQC, and the main assessment functions of those funding councils choosing to contract with the agency for the discharge of those functions."
>
> JPG 1996b: 4 § 2

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audit procedures, would include the following elements: a) a scrutiny of the institution's review processes to establish that the self-assessment and review have been undertaken; b) a scrutiny of the outcomes of the subject/programme assessment visits; c) a scrutiny of the ways institutions' develop the standards in different domains and "benchmarking by similar provision in other domains"; and d) scrutiny of the accreditation by professional bodies.

As regards the assessment of subject/programmes, the CVCP adopted the view that all academic programmes and research leading to a qualification should be evaluated through self-assessment as part of internal review processes. The process would be carried out by a team of internal and external accredited reviewers who would report to the agency on the quality of teaching in the concerned institution. Finally, the CVCP also pointed out the need for the new body to take over the functions then under the responsibility of the HEQC (CVCP 1995: 6 § 3.4.2).

The report acknowledged that the monitoring and review of the provision of education remained with the institutions. The agency would operate external reviews of that provision and of the institution's internal procedures for its review (JPG 1996b § 5). The structure of the new agency borrowed from what had been presented in the intermediate report and its missions were clarified (JPG 1996b: 6 § 15). Two years had passed since the Secretary of State called for an integrated system of quality assurance. Discussions among the most directly involved bodies had led to the creation of a single body responsible for both audit-driven and assessment-driven procedures.

The Dearing[65] report, published in July 1997, boosted the proposals made by the JPG (Dearing 1997; see also DfEE 1998). The report was important inasmuch as it further developed the framework within which the new QAA was requested to operate[66]. Indeed, the QAA's current framework of activity is the implementation of the Dearing agenda. The Quality Agency was asked

- "to work with institutions to establish small, expert teams to provide benchmark information on standards, in particular threshold standards, operating within the framework of qualifications, and completing the task by 2000;
- to work with the universities and other degree-awarding institutions to create, within three years, a UK-wide pool of academic staff recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency from which institutions must select external examiners;
- to develop a fair and robust system for complaints relating to educational provision;
- to review the arrangements in place for granting degree-awarding powers."

Dearing 1997: Recommendation 25

The QAA officially began to operate on August 1st that year (QAA 1997). It soon started to work on the framework to be used for the assessment of quality. For that purpose, sector-wide consultations were launched regarding the areas to be covered, the type of assessment

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65 The Dearing Committee was appointed by the government in May 1996 to make recommendations on the future of HE in the United Kingdom.

66 For instance, Dearing proposed to modify QAA's sphere of activity in order to encompass:
- quality assurance and public information;
- standards verification;
- the maintenance of the qualifications framework;
- a requirement that the arrangements for these are encompassed in a code of practice which every institution should be required formally to adopt, by 2001/02, as a condition of public funding" (Dearing 1997: Recommendation 24).

The Report also pointed out that the traditional system of external examiners responsible to ensure that institutions deliver common standards was not appropriate to meet the needs of a wider and more diversified system. Recommendations were made to build up a system where the responsibility to deliver the degree rest with the institutions but where the general standard of awards is a shared responsibility of the entire sector.

to be undertaken and the timing of the procedures. In section 5.4.4 the composition of the QAA was described. As noted then, QAA's Board is composed of 14 members of whom only 4 are appointed by the universities. In addition, the work of the Agency is carried out to allow the Funding Councils to meet its statutory obligation of informing government decisions. In this sense, one can argue that universities have lost further prerogatives in the domain of quality assurance. Whereas the HEQC, despite the internal conflicts that existed, did remain within the sector, the QAA can be considered, because of its composition, largely as a non-sector body. The limited weight of HE in the Agency's Board is a clear sign of this loss of power, which, in itself, could best characterise British HE throughout the period analysed here.

5.7. Summary and Provisional Conclusions

Recent history of the quality assurance policy domain in the UK has thus been characterised by the increasing influence of the political authorities. This increasing influence has spread throughout the system of HE itself and has made British HE the most regulated system of the four analysed in the present research. This chapter has highlighted how the role of the different actors at play in the formulation of quality assurance policy evolved over the years and how government and governmental agencies progressively came to occupy a central position. In this perspective, the QAA is currently the most important actor in the domain of quality assurance, although, when these lines were being written, increasing concerns were being expressed as regards the instruments used by the Agency.

If one looks back at the elements that most influenced the type of responses to the fundamental choices in quality assurance, one would remark that they originate from within the national context. In general terms, the coming to power of the Conservative Party in 1979 was a decisive moment in the re-formulation of the ideational foundations of HE policy and in the emergence of quality assurance as an issue. Accountability and efficiency were brought forward as central elements, as was the construction of market-like structures to promote inter-institutional competition and enhance public choice. The whole HE system was re-shaped not only to meet these requirements but also to ensure that this was the case. Consequently, the construction of the quality assurance policy domain was strongly

influenced by the overall transformations that occurred outside the domain of HE. However, changes outside the domain of HE impacted inside it.

In this regard, a first important element was the opposition between the two former sectors that formed HE until 1992. This opposition has to be understood as different reactions expressed to similar demands from government. As noted, over the years, the opposition grew and, at the moment of the unification of the system, it was not simply two types of institutions that were coming together but, indeed, two traditions. To a large extent, the opposing traditions gave weight to a considerable degree of mistrust between representatives of the sectors. Universities, on the one hand, were convinced of their excellence. They had confidence in their external examiner system and, in 1990, had even accepted the scrutiny of the AAU. On the other hand, the institutions of the public sector had been under external scrutiny for a long time. They knew what it was all about and were pleased to see a similar process being introduced in the universities. It can be argued that, eventually, the government took advantage of the situation of little coherence within the sector to find its way through. The government had, as noted, exacerbated the differences between the sectors as regards institutional autonomy and accountability. This was, for instance, explicit in the 1985 Green Paper. In addition, the government had also lost confidence in the university sector, especially in the light of their handling of the financial cuts of the early 1980s. There was the feeling that what being done in the university sector to ensure quality was not enough. An interviewee pointed out that the government did not consider that the work of the Academic Standards Groups would be sufficient to bring the university sector in line with the requirements of the government (2.V.b.6). Moreover, the fact that the 1991 White Paper, where the structure of quality assurance in the unified system was presented, was unveiled before the first AAU reports were published certainly highlights the actual interest paid to what was being done.

Another important factor in the construction of the policy domain has been the very early emphasis the political authorities put on accountability and efficiency. This has to be related to the overall political project designed by the Conservative Party to reduce the role of the state and to retain a tight control of the expenditure in each policy domain. These concerns were met by the progressive elaboration of quantitative PIs and changes in the organisational features of the universities. Besides the accountability and efficiency concerns, PIs have also

emerged as the government's principal means of achieving as transparent a system of HE as possible, where prospective students, employers and parents can find information on how institutions perform.

As regards other factors, especially the role of the international environment, neither the analysis of the documentation nor the interviews suggest that the quality assurance policy domain in England was much influenced by international developments.

Chapter 6 The Netherlands

6.1. Introduction

A cross-national study on quality assurance policy would not be complete without a reference to the Dutch experience. As noted, the Netherlands was among the pioneers to establish a systematised set of instruments in quality assurance policy in Europe. How this was done has since been regarded as an example of successful practice. However, the Dutch "model" of quality assurance was not born under the most favourable auspices. Rather, its roots lie in the transformations experienced by the HE system at the turn of the 1970s. It is useful to recall that this period was marked by the effects of the economic recession that followed the first oil crisis in 1973. The economic situation forced the government of the day to engage in a series of retrenchment policies and to retreat from several areas of traditional state activity. In HE, this led to a reorganisation of the whole system with changes in the patterns of state/HE relationships, which took place in a context of dramatic budget cuts, an increase in the number of students and widespread political dissatisfaction with the overall achievements of HE institutions. Most of these changes resulted from a series of policy papers that appeared throughout the early and mid-1980s. They all emphasised the importance of re-formulating HE policy on the basis of increased institutional autonomy linked up with ways of ensuring quality throughout the system.

Framed within this general context, this chapter addresses the construction of the quality assurance policy domain in the Netherlands. It first looks at the most significant political and societal features of the country, on the basis of existing literature. In section 6.3, the focus turns to a description of the HE system and, in section 6.4, to the institutional actors involved in the formulation of HE policy in general and their role in quality assurance. This latter point is further discussed throughout sections 6.5 and 6.6. Finally, section 6.7 summarises the main findings of the chapter.

6.2. Political and Societal Features in the Netherlands

This section outlines the political and societal features that are predominant in the Dutch context. It offers a first insight into the factors to be considered in the process of policy formulation and implementation.

6.2.1. Consociational Democracy

Political scientists agree on the fact that one of the historical characteristics of the Dutch political system is the capacity to integrate centripetal forces within a structure of consensual decision-making. These characteristics were formulated by Lijphart when he noted that "[t]he political system of the Netherlands presents a paradox to the social scientist" (Lijphart 1975: 1). The paradox opposed the degree of social cleavages, on the one hand, and the political and economic stability on the other[67]. According to Lijphart, the explanation of the Dutch exception was to be found in a third, alternative model: "consociational democracy". As Blom recalls (2000: 153-154), this third model mirrored an old tradition of "accommodation" in Dutch politics, derived from the segmentation of society into four groups: Roman Catholics, orthodox Protestants, socialists/social democrats and liberals/with non-partisan or national sentiments. These four groups formed the pillars[68] upon which the Dutch polity was founded. Each group had its own networks and institutions (such as churches, schools, political parties, etc) that had to be preserved and protected. For Lijphart, the Dutch elites realised the danger of having such clear-cut religious and socio-economic cleavages and opted for aborting the potential risks at base by developing a political style based on accommodation[69] among the elites at the top of each pillar.

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67 As a matter of fact, this paradox seemed somewhat contradictory with the dominant dichotomy of democratic political systems of the time. This dichotomy opposed the Anglo-Saxon two-party model of political system, synonym of political stability, to the continental European multi-party system, associated with political instability.

68 From the term "pillar" (*zuilen* in Dutch) derives the notion of pillarisation (*verzuilen*), as a conceptual devise accounting for the core beliefs upon which the political system and, indeed, the entire Dutch society, are based. Together with a progressive deconfessionalisation, questions have arisen in recent years as to what extent pillarisation is still relevant in current Dutch politics (Lijphart 1975: 196-219; *West European Politics,* 2000).

69 The origins of the politics of accommodation are not clearly determined. Daalder, for instance, traces the origins of a consensual policy style not to a particular "enlightenment" of Dutch elites after World War One but, rather, to a much older tradition of bargaining and negotiations that had developed since the times of the Confederal Dutch Republic (Daalder 1966). In this perspective, the pillarised society and the political agreements stemming from it, would simply be a re-actualisation of older processes and practices in modern times. By contrast, Lijphart locates the basic feature of accommodation in the period between 1878 and 1917, when the four pillars faced each other on three important issues: the position of the church and the state as regards education; the issue of franchise and the issue of collective bargaining and labour rights

The politics of accommodation had two main consequences. First, the intermediate associations gained increasing powers in the management of their own affairs. They would do so within the general framework laid down by the government and with its financial support (Blom 2000: 154). Second, the politics of accommodation also impacted on the shape of formal political life. For instance, legal rights, top administrative positions and government budget, would be distributed among the pillars and their respective interest groups on a equal basis. In addition, the introduction of a proportional electoral system in 1917 resulted in a large number of parties competing for vote shares and the impossibility for any of them to gain a majority. Consequently, government formation depends on post-electoral negotiations among parties on a common policy statement (Gladdish 1991: 129)[70].

As a result, the executive government, or Cabinet, shows the striking characteristic of having been a coalition since the end of World War I. Cabinet members cannot sit in Parliament, although they, and especially the Prime Minister, can have been elected to one of the two Houses. They are constitutionally part of the Queen's government and their responsibility goes beyond party discipline and embraces the interests of the whole country. Over the years, the Cabinet has become the most important political institution. Not only has it replaced the

(Lijphart 1975: 104). De Swaan (1982: 220-221) explains as follows the foundations of the politics of accommodation: "The various sections of the Dutch population have been organized in rather tight and isolated hierarchies or "pillars", each capped by a group of quite authoritarian yet moderate leaders. These leaders settle urgent matters among themselves or leave them deliberately in abeyance, without too much pressure from their constituents, who are often left in the dark; all of this is very much in the tradition of the patrician Dutch regents of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries".
Lijphart summarised the basic characteristics of this consociational model in his "seven rules" of Dutch politics: business of politics, agreement to disagree, summit diplomacy, proportionality, depoliticisation of ideologically loaded issues, secrecy, the Government's right to govern (Lijphart 1975: 122-138).

70 Tops and Dittrich (1992: 281), describe as follows the process of coalition building: "Generally, coalition building processes in the Netherlands can be divided into three phases. In the first phase, a provisional decision is taken on the composition of the coalition. In the second phase, negotiations on the government programme are conducted between the proposed coalition partners. In the third and last phase, decisions are taken on the portfolio distribution and on the personal composition of the cabinet (...)".
In practice, it can take some time before an agreement is reached as to what parties will join the governing coalition. The latter will tend to aim at the centre of the political spectrum. In this regard, an important feature of Dutch politics is that rises or setbacks in electoral votes do not necessarily imply that the gaining or loosing parties will be present or absent in the executive. Gladdish (1991: 132) recalls that despite important defeats in the 1967, 1971 and 1972 elections, the Catholic People's Party still managed to have ministers appointed in the government. By contrast, the substantial gains in electoral support from the Labour party in 1977, 1982 or 1986 did not secure them any place in the Cabinet.

monarch as the effective part of the state but it has also taken over the policy-making responsibility from the Parliament[71] (Andeweg 1988: 47).

Relationships between the executive and the legislative are intricate. First, despite the fact that members of the Cabinet are accountable to the Parliament and can be dismissed, the peculiar nature of the coalition building means that Parliament cannot censure a particular Minister without running the risk of causing the fall of the whole Cabinet (Andeweg 1988: 51). Second, the executive is dependent on the support of the groups representing the governing coalition in the Parliament for the adoption of its policy orientations (Gladdish 1991: 113; Keman 1996: 231).

The Dutch Parliament is composed of two Houses holding unequal powers. The Lower House is the most important inasmuch as it can initiate the legislative process. By contrast, the Upper House can only ratify legislation adopted in the other House. The increasing role of the Cabinet in generating bills has left the Parliament with (almost) the sole task of discussing, amending and enacting them. To fulfil its task, several committees exist in both Houses dividing the area of legislation into subject fields. Besides the adoption of legislation, the Parliament can also make policy proposals, which may latter be turned into legislation[72].

The late 1970s and early 1980s were characterised by a relative political instability, which, combined with the growth of government activity of previous years, meant that the administration gained delegated prerogatives in initiating legislation on behalf of the Cabinet (van Schendelen 1999: 116). As a result, relationships between administrative bureaux and organised interests intensified and civil servants began to be considered as crucial policy actors despite the fact that there was little coherence among the different components of the administration. Andeweg (1988: 64) notes that there is no unified civil service in the

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71 The importance of the Cabinet in initiating legislation is such that 97% of all the bills discussed in Parliament between 1965 and 1985 were initiated by a member of the Cabinet (Andeweg and Bakema 1994: 66)

72 This is done via motions whose number and, indeed, importance in the policy-making process has increased dramatically in recent years. The legislative function of the Parliament begins with a first reading of a bill, which, as pointed out, is often brought forward by the Cabinet. The bill is then sent to the appropriate committee for further consideration. At this stage, amendments can be incorporated. Once the committee has reached an agreement, the bill is sent back to the Lower House for a second reading. The objective of the minister is to have its piece of legislation adopted with as little alteration as possible and, to that end, s/he can rely on the members of her/his party. Once an agreement has been achieved, the discussion is passed onto the Upper House for a plenary debate. As noted, this House cannot amend a piece of legislation. It can only accept or reject it in the form that has been submitted to it by the Lower House. After the bill has been ratified, it is submitted for royal assent and is counter-signed by the relevant minister (Gladdish 1991: 109-111).

Netherlands. Rather, the central element remains the Department and civil servants are employed by and fall under the regulations of their own department (Andeweg and Bakema 1994: 61). Therefore, ministries enjoy large prerogatives, further reinforced by the corporatist nature of policy-making, a direct outcome of the politics of accommodation. Over the years, there has been an increase in advisory councils and committees, which allowed consultations to take place between the government, indeed departmental representatives, and organised interest groups (Andeweg 1988: 64). In addition, the departmentalisation of the administration can reach its highest point when representatives of the societal organisations are appointed as Ministers. A good example was the appointment of the former Chairman of the higher vocational education council as Minister of Education in 1982.

6.2.2. The Politics of Accommodation and the Organisation of the Policy Domains

In the form just depicted, the politics of accommodation have also impacted on policy-making. In this respect, two important features have to be recalled (Gladdish 1991: 138-139). The first is the consensual approach to policy-making in the form of arrangements being reached with agencies and other bodies representing the organised interests of the different pillars. Accommodation is at play in the policy circuits, which exemplify the close relationship among Ministers, parliamentary committees, advisory committees and other organised interests on particularly sensitive issues (Andeweg and Bakema 1994: 68). The second feature has been the strong commitment to central planning, especially in the Cabinets that followed the end of World War II.

Post-war policy-making was based on a consensus on economic growth, full employment and price stability (Gladdish 1991: 139). This consensus broke down after the 1973 oil crisis. The prospect of economic prosperity was challenged, as was central planning as the means to achieve it. For Kickert (1995: 142), the oil crisis was a crucial turning point as regards the belief in central planing for fighting unemployment. This strategy was not successful and unemployment grew despite governmental action. The economic situation was a source of serious concern (Andeweg and Irwin 1993: 210). The oil crisis also provoked changes in the governing coalition. The 1977 elections resulted in a coalition between the Christian Democratic Party (CDA)[73] and the Liberal Party (VVD). The most striking characteristic of

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[73] The current Dutch Christian Democratic Party (*Christen-Democratisch Akkoord* – CDA) is the outcome of the merger among the traditional confessional parties, i.e. Catholic People's Party (*Katholieke Volkspartij* - KVP), the Christian Historical Union (*Christelijk-Historische Unie* - CHU) and the Anti-Revolutionary

the latter party was a visceral opposition to central bureaucratic planning and a belief in market forces. Such a view was combined with changes in the ideology of the CDA, themselves motivated by increasing concerns regarding the growing influence of the state on large sectors of society. This led the CDA to adopt the belief in a "responsible society" in which:

> "(...) citizens should become less dependent and helpless, and should bear more responsibility for themselves and for each other. A sense of social and civic duty should be restored and coherence in social services should be more determined by citizens within their own social organizations. Organizations operating in the field between the state and society should be given more room to manoeuvre."
>
> Kickert 1995: 142

In this context, both parties committed themselves to reducing public expenditure and expanding the activities of the private sector (Gladdish 1991: 153). After a brief interval in 1981-1982, the CDA-VVD coalition returned to power in November 1982 with the firm intention to get the economy back on track through a range of measures among which the progressive stepping back of the state and the deregulation of policy domains were key features. It was the beginning of the "no-nonsense" policy style (3.IV.hm.5).

This section has discussed some of the most important political and societal features in the Netherlands. It has pointed out the consensual approach to policy-making and highlighted the cultural and political shift of the late 1970s, which was going to impact strongly on both the policy beliefs and the policy instruments in the domain of HE. These elements are further elaborated later in the chapter. Before that, the Dutch system of HE and the institutional actors involved in the policy-making process are discussed.

6.3. The Dutch System of Higher Education

The current structure of Dutch HE is characterised by the existence of a binary divide between academic and higher professional education. The coming into force of the *Higher*

Party (*Anti-Revolutionaire Partij* - ARP) (de Swaan 1982: 222-223; Gladdish 1991: 42-47. See also Andeweg and Irwin 1993: 60-61). Historically, the CDA held a crucial role in Dutch politics. Its middle-ground position meant that either of the two most important secular parties, i.e. the Social Democratic Party or the Liberal Party, had to find an agreement with the CDA to form a coalition. An example of the importance of the CDA in Dutch politics can be seen in its un-interrupted presence in Cabinet since 1977, when it first appeared as a common platform in front of the electors (Gladdish 1991: 60). This hegemony ended in 1994 when the CDA was expelled from the Cabinet for the first time!

Education and Research Act (WHW) in 1993 placed the whole of HE under the same legislative framework. The following paragraphs present the principal features of the two sectors taken into consideration in this study, the universities and the institutions of higher professional education[74].

6.3.1. The University Sector

The Dutch university system has its roots in the mid-16th century when the University of Leiden (1575) was established, soon to be followed by the Universities of Groningen (1614), Amsterdam (1632) and Utrecht (1634) (Goedegebuure *et al.* 1994: 189). The mid-19th century witnessed the creation of private institutions and the upgrading of professional schools into formal HE institutions (Frijhoff 1992). Traditionally, the university sector was under tight state control, although little attention was actually paid to the situation within the institutions (Rosenberg 1983: 192). This situation was going to change from the late 1970s onwards. From these transformations, emerged the situation currently observable.

Nowadays, the Dutch university system encompasses 13 institutions[75], all providing degree and post-degree courses on a part- and full-time basis. Their core business has traditionally been to teach and to undertake research. To these basic missions, the 1993 WHW added the requirement of knowledge-transfer to the benefit of society. All the universities are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Science (*Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen* MOCW – see below), with the exception of the Agricultural University, which is under the responsibility of the Minister of Agriculture. As regards issues of quality assurance, however, all the institutions are integrated in the general framework further discussed below. In the academic year 1999/2000, there were 158,500 students enrolled in university education (MOCW 2001: 73)

6.3.2. The Higher Vocational Education Sector (*Hoger Beroepsonderwijs* – HBO-sector)

Non-university HE in the Netherlands is provided principally by HBO-sector institutions. These are private institutions, inasmuch as they are privately run and managed by their board,

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74 Beside these two sectors, HE in the Netherlands is also provided by the Open University, in operation since 1984. There are neither admission requirements nor limitations in the location, timing or rhythm of study. Students are free to create their own programme of study by combining different modules. Even if the regulations concerning the Open University fall into the same Act ruling the university and non-university sector, its mere objectives and structures make it a rather different sector to be analysed in the present study. For that reason, it will not be discussed any further in the coming pages.

75 Among the 13 universities, 3 concentrate on engineering and technical education, one is concerned with agriculture and the remaining 9 provide courses in most disciplines.

but receive their funds from the government. The roots of these institutions lie in the 19th century and have emerged out from the guild corporations.

The HBO-sector has experienced an important growth since the late 1960s. At that period, this sector was seen considerably cheaper than the universities and was offering the type of education perceived as important for the Dutch economy (Goedegebuure *et al.* 1994: 190-191). The growth in the number of these institutions provoked an important discussion as regards the internal organisation of the system. During the 1980s, the HBO-sector underwent a process of mergers that saw the number of institutions melt from 376 in 1975 to 91 by 1990 and, later, to the 63 institutions currently in operation (HBO-Raad 2000; see also Goedegebuure 1992). In 1986, the passing of the HBO-Act brought this sector out of secondary education and placed it formally into HE.

Although reduced, diversity still characterises this sector nowadays. In 1999, the 63 institutions offered over 200 different qualifications, thus meeting a wide spectrum of the labour market demands[76]. They provide theoretical and practical training for occupations requiring a higher vocational qualification. In contrast to the universities, the HBO-sector institutions do not have to carry out research activities. The number of students attending non-university HE has increased substantially in recent years. In 2000, the HBO-sector accommodated some 290'000 full-time and part-time students[77] (MOCW 2001: 63).

Having outlined the Dutch system of HE, the chapter continues with a discussion of the principal actors involved in HE policy and their role in the domain of quality assurance.

6.4. Actors Involved in Dutch Higher Education Policy

HE in the Netherlands is regulated by the central government. Four bodies play a crucial role in the formulation of the policy.

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76 Most HBO-sector institutions provide part- and full-time courses in seven areas: Education, Economics, Behaviour and Society, Language and Culture, Engineering and Technology, Agriculture and the Natural Environment, and Health. Once completed, generally after 4 years, the institutions award a degree equivalent to the English Bachelor of Arts.

77 Accommodating more students has made authorities of this sector aware that they were perceived as equally valid in the provision of HE. This has made them more insistent on their claims to become part of the "dominant" model of HE, i.e. the universities.

6.4.1. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (*Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen* – MOCW)

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is the main governmental actor in HE[78]. It is headed by a Minister responsible for ensuring the quality of educational provision. In addition, s/he is held accountable before Parliament for the public funds invested in education. In this respect, the Minister can, on the advice of the Higher Education Inspectorate, threaten an institution with withdrawal of state funding for a course that fails to achieve minimum requirements for quality.

6.4.2. The (Higher) Education Inspectorate (*Inspectie van het (Hoger) Onderwijs*)

The Education Inspectorate is an autonomous body operating on behalf of the MOCW throughout the Dutch educational system. The Education Inspectorate has four main sectors of activity, one of which is HE. As regards quality assurance, the Higher Education Inspectorate fulfils two main tasks. On the one hand, it performs an evaluation of the procedures for quality assurance as run by the institutions. On the other hand, it follows up the procedures and determines whether the recommendations resulting from these procedures are taken into account. In addition, the HE Inspectorate reports every year to the Minister on the state of HE in the country. As further developed below, this latter task has become an issue of intense debate between the HE Inspectorate and the institutions, mainly because of the information requested by the former to the sector and which can only be obtained through the quality assurance procedures run by the institutions.

6.4.3. The Association of Dutch Universities in the Netherlands (*Vereniging van Samenwerkende Nederlandse Universiteiten* - VSNU)

The universities are grouped within the Association of Universities in the Netherlands. It was established in 1985 at a moment of radical transformations in Dutch HE and played a crucial role in managing to retain substantial control of the implementation of the policies decided at

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[78] Besides the MOCW, the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Fishery is responsible for institutions providing agricultural education in both sectors but its actual room for manoeuvre in the definition of the quality assurance procedures is not too relevant. The Ministry of Finance also has its say in all the issues related to the funding of the system. As far as the formulation of the policy is concerned, however, the main body remains the MOCW. The MOCW was traditionally organised on the basis of field directorates responsible for the formulation and implementation of policy in different areas among which higher and professional education. Jenniskens (1997: 106) notes that as a result of a restructuring in 1984, these field directorates were complemented with so-called "supporting directorates". These were responsible for the policy formulation in areas that cut across the different fields, such as legislation or financial issues.

that time. The VSNU defends its members' interests against the MOCW and co-ordinates the tasks of the different institutions. The VSNU is responsible for the implementation of the external procedures for quality assurance in the university sector. For that purpose, it prepares the guidelines for quality assessment and organises on-site visits. The VSNU has played a crucial role since its establishment in retaining control of a large number of instruments for quality assurance within the university sector.

6.4.4. The HBO-Raad (*Hoger Beroepsonderwijs Raad* – HBO-Raad)

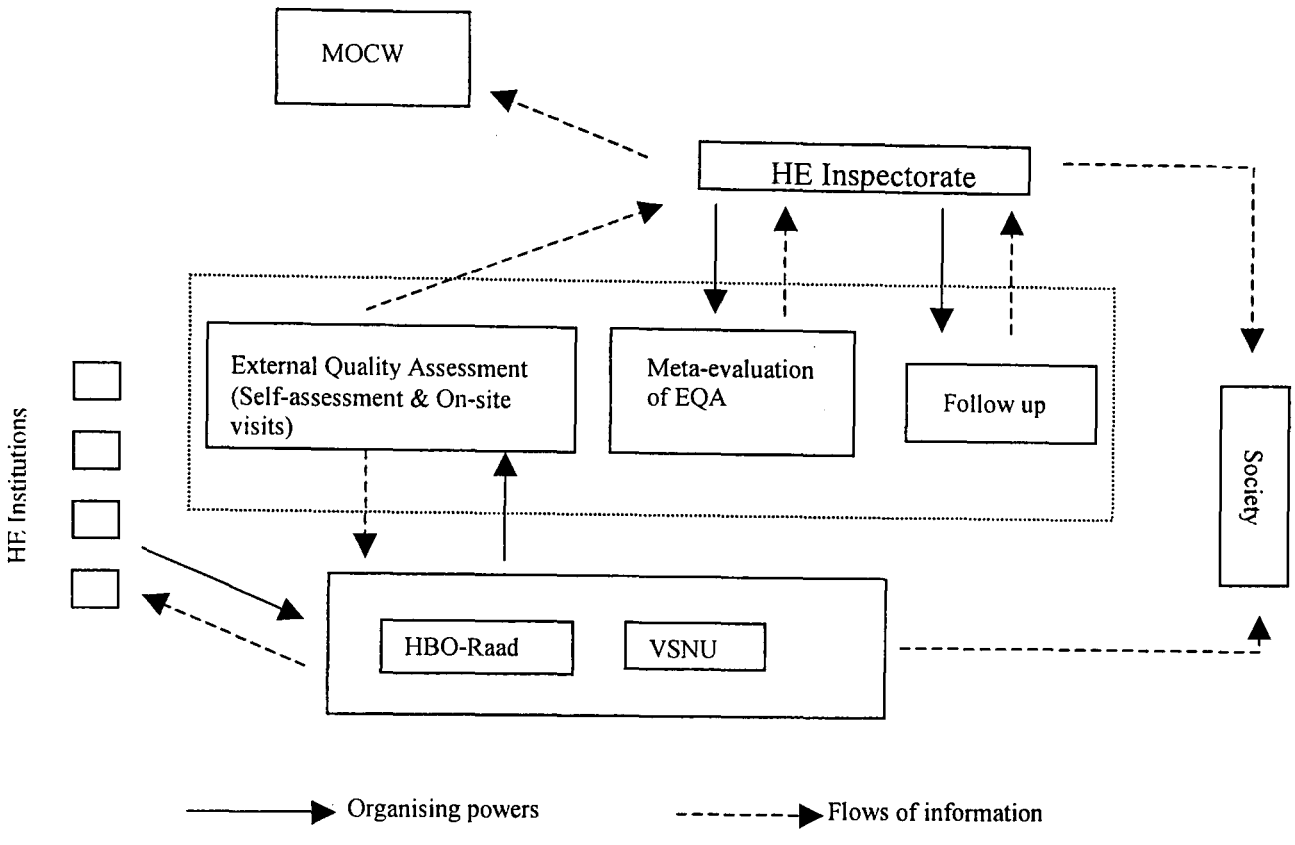
Established in 1975, the HBO-Raad is the umbrella organisation of the institutions of higher vocational education. A policy advisor at the HBO-Raad, summarises in the following terms the creation of the Council:

> "The HBO-Raad is the outcome of private initiatives from within the institutions combined with governmental initiatives. Through the creation of the HBO-Raad, the government saw the possibility of stimulating the emancipation process of higher professional education. If you want to have one clear discussion partner and you see the old field with hundreds of small institutions, what it your best policy? It is to have just one partner because you can never talk to all these small institutions. So you set up an organisation covering the entire field."
>
> 2.IV.b.18

Like its university counterpart, the HBO-Raad plays an important role in the procedures related to external quality assessment within the non-university sector. Its tasks consist nowadays in organising the on-site visits. A unit specialised in quality assessment has been in operation within the HBO-Raad since the early 1990s. This unit is responsible for the co-ordination of the process of external assessment as well as for the organisation of the on-site visit and the related material.

This section has outlined the main actors involved in HE policy and their role as regards quality assurance policy. Their relationships can be sketched out in Figure 6.1. In the following pages, quality assurance policy is addressed in more detail on the basis of the synchronic/diachronic distinction sketched out in chapter 4.

FIGURE 6.1. RELATIONSHIPS AMONG ACTORS IN THE DOMAIN OF QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY IN DUTCH HIGHER EDUCATION



6.5. Quality Assurance Policy in Dutch Higher Education: The Synchronic View

As a result of the binary nature of the Dutch HE system, the university and non-university sectors have developed their own policies for quality assurance. These reflect both similarities and differences. The former stem not only from the fact that the HBO-sector borrowed the overall approach previously developed by the universities but also from similar general objectives. Differences also prevail, not least because of the disparate origins of the two sectors and their respective relationship to the practical knowledge and the labour market. The present section outlines the structure of the quality assurance policy domain as of December 2000.

Objectives: formative with an (increasing) summative touch

There are increasing debates as regards the objectives quality assurance policy should pursue. These debates highlight the opposition between formative and summative approaches. In this perspective, besides the formative objectives, traditionally defended by the institutions,

especially the universities, accountability concerns have gained importance. In the university sector, the primary objective of the instruments consists in maintaining or, where appropriate, improving an existing situation. Alongside this formative purpose, a summative one has emerged. This implies that:

> "A general statement [about the overall quality of the area investigated] is not sufficient. Statements about several aspects are wanted, like a statement about goals and aims, about the content of the programme, about the student counselling and about study load."
>
> Vroeijenstijn 1999: 3-4

To a large extent, accountability concerns remain subject to the principal formative objective, although the information requested during the part of the process highlights the relevance of the issue.

In the HBO-sector, the balance between formative and summative purposes of quality assurance policy can be highlighted in the official objectives stated by the HBO-Raad for its quality assessment programme:

> "(...) to gain insight into the quality of the education and to contribute to the assurance and improvement of the quality of individual programmes. In this manner, higher professional education demonstrates its accountability concerning the quality of the education. In addition, the Quality Assessment Programme contributes to augmenting the social recognition of the programmes, the qualification obtained, and to the public information facilities."
>
> HBO-Raad: 1999: 3

Control: institution-based policies with supervisory role of the state

As regards the control of the policy domain, the Dutch situation characterises itself by a reliance on the role of the institutions both collectively and individually. The government retains the right of supervision over the domain as a whole through the meta-evaluations undertaken by the HE Inspectorate. The VSNU and the HBO-Raad control the formulation of the policy instruments to be used during the first two stages of the process. To that end, they dispose of a checklist of the information requested for the procedures (Klerk *et al.* 1998: 6; HBO-Raad 1999: 7-10). The VSNU also appoints the external visiting committees and provides administrative and organisational support. Individual units, generally departments, are responsible for the organisation of the first stage of the process, i.e. the internal self-assessment.

At the other end of the process, the HE Inspectorate evaluates the adequacy of the whole process. This is the meta-evaluation task, fulfilled by assessing the reports received from the

visiting committees. Special attention is paid to the methodological aspects and to the extent to which the conclusions they get meet the requirement of improving the quality of the educational provision as well as its accountability to the political authorities and society at large. The HE Inspectorate also retains control of the follow up procedures, thus assessing how the individual institutions have reacted to the results of the assessment of their programmes. If it finds that the institutions have not done enough, the MOCW is informed and sanctions can be taken (Vroeijenstijn 1999: 2; see also Brennan and Shah 2000: 63-64).

Areas: the study programmes

Quality assurance policy in the Netherlands address teaching and the general management of the institutions and research activities in the university sector only. The policy discussed in the chapter is confined to teaching activities. In both sectors, the instruments developed to address the quality of teaching activities are based on the assessment of study programmes grouped into clusters. In contrast to other countries, there are no institution-wide audits. This task is considered to be a responsibility of the individual institutions.

Procedures: internal-external combination

The instrument used as part of the quality assurance policy is the external quality assessment. In the university sector, each programme is assessed every six years, whereas in the HBO-sector, it is every six to seven years. The policy instrument is based on four stages. The first two rest with the institutions, whereas the two others fall under the responsibility of the HE Inspectorate. The same procedures are used in the two sectors:

- an *internal* self-evaluation prepared annually by the providers of the educational programme, i.e. the department, on the basis of the checklist provided by the umbrella organisation;
- an *external* review of these study programmes by a visiting committee every five to seven years depending on the sectors; the committee's reports and recommendations are made public;
- and a *meta-evaluation* of the whole process undertaken by the Inspectorate for higher education on behalf of the MOCW.
- a *follow up* of the measures taken by the institutions after the visits.

Uses: internal and for society

The data gathered during the assessment visits are primarily oriented towards formative purposes, although external-oriented uses are also present nowadays. Here the reports of the visiting committees are crucial. In the university sector, information is provided for each

study programme together with an overall comparison of the discipline (Vroeijenstijn 1999: 4) together with recommendations at the national level. The information collected is not directly linked with funding, although an indirect relationship does exist via the possibility offered to the MOCW to retain or withdraw funds of those study programmes that are of bad quality. Both the HBO-sector and the universities publish the reports of the visiting committees. These reports have had some success in the press, leading to the publication of student guides offering information on the study programmes. In fact, there is increasing pressure on the institutions to provide information in a way that is more straightforwardly useable by potential students.

This is the Dutch structure of quality assurance policy domain as of December 2000. The following paragraphs reconstruct the process through which the present structure has emerged.

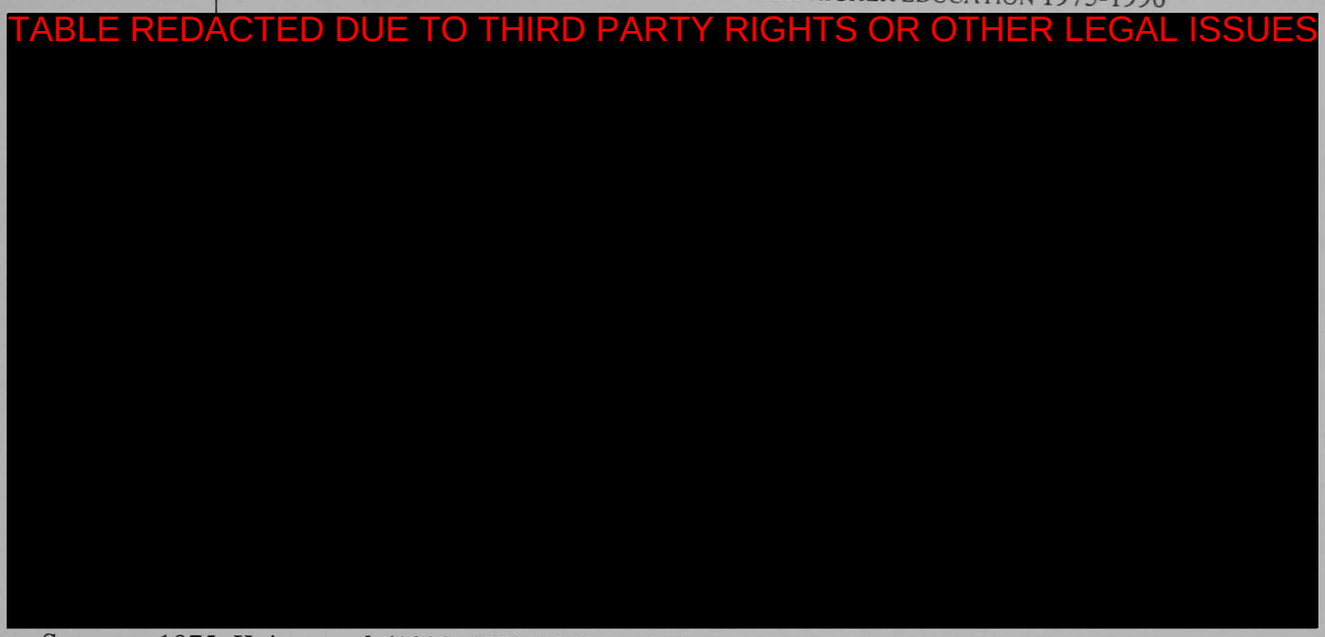
6.6. Quality Assurance Policy in Dutch Higher Education: The Diachronic View

Up until the late 1970s, quality assurance policy was not an issue in Dutch HE. In fact, until then, "efficiency" in Dutch universities simply consisted of remaining within the norms and legislation fixed by the government (Dockrell 1990: 119). The emergence of the quality debate in Dutch HE can be traced back to the profound transformations that took place during the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially the changing relationships between HE institutions and the political authorities in a context characterised by the implementation of various retrenchment policies.

6.6.1. The Policy Context

By the late 1970s, Dutch HE was not at its best. The policy paper Higher Education for Many (*hoger onderwijs voor velen*) had opened up access to tertiary-level education to students who were traditionally excluded. The expansion, however, also resulted in a high dropout rate and the duration of study was generally considered too long (Maassen *et al.* 1993: 140). Table 6.1 offers an overview of the expansion.

TABLE 6.1. EVOLUTION OF THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN DUTCH HIGHER EDUCATION 1975-1996



Sources: 1975: Kaiser *et al.* (1992: 193); 1980 to 1995: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (Various Issues)

The situation was not much brighter in the HBO-sector. Traditionally, this sector had been paid less political attention. It did not have its own legislation but was regulated by the 1968 Secondary Education Act, which made that the HBO-sector institutions were under the scrutiny of the Inspectorate of Education. A difference of treatment existed as regards the form of external scrutiny in the two sectors. Whereas universities had a life of their own, the vocational sector was, by the late 1970s, tightly controlled from the outside (Boezerooy 1999: 12). When the two systems were put on the same level, through the passing of the 1986 HBO-Act, the question of the form of control of HE as a whole would arise. The number of HBO-sector institutions was high, with important variations in the number of enrolled students and the areas of teaching (Goedegebuure 1989: 77). In addition, these institutions were usually run by former teachers who had little or no managerial skills (Maassen *et al.* 1993: 141), which was another cause of concern. To sum up, the whole picture of Dutch HE at the beginning of the 1980s showed the need for important transformations.

A first response was the publication, in 1981, of a proposal for a new University Education Act (*Wet op het Wetenshappelijk Onderwijs* - WWO). In this proposal, the future procedures for quality assurance based on internal and external elements could already be spotted. It was proposed that internal quality assessment remained with the universities and the different procedures were to be set up by the different Academic Councils (Klerk *et al.* 1998: 4). External quality assessment mechanisms were to be developed by a special body independent from the

institutions. The WWO proposed to assign this task to a HE Inspectorate, something the universities opposed. However, in a context characterised by the combination of economic recession and changes in the role of the political authorities in different policy domains, the position of the universities and HE in general was no longer a dominant one. Rather, the early 1980s marked the beginning of profound transformations of the entire system. These took the shape of two different sets of policies: the corrective and facilitative reforms (van Vught 1991; Goedegebuure and Westerheijden 1991). Spread over the first half of the 1980s, they formed the policy framework from which emerged the debate on quality. Let us see how.

Corrective policies were implemented in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They were presented as a means to reduce the financial participation of the state in HE and to modify a system perceived at that time as inefficient. Several proposals were elaborated in order to solve the problems of the study length and dropout rates. They culminated in the passing of the 1981 Two-Tier Act (*Wet Tween-Fasenstructuur*)[79]. This Act created great expectations but the results were somewhat more mitigated. The main objectives of the reform, reducing the dropouts and the length of studies, were only partly met and the way the reforms were implemented was seen by the universities as a top-down imposition from the government (van Vught 1991: 118). But more was to come.

In fact, the Two-Tier Act was soon followed by a wave of budgetary cuts. These were encompassed in the Task Reallocation and Concentration operation (*Taakverdeling en Concentratie* - TVC), launched in 1981. The TVC operation aimed at reducing the cost of the universities, regrouping research activities and redefining the geographical location of disciplines (Maassen *et al.* 1993: 142). In 1986, it was followed by a second set of retrenchment policies. These were known as Selective Concentration and Expansion (*Selectieve Krimp and Groei* – SKG).

Whereas the TVC operation mainly addressed the universities, the 1983 Scale Enlargement, Task Reallocation and Concentration operation (*Schaalvergroting, Taakverdeling en*

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79 The first tier was to last four years, i.e. one year less than before. In order to complete their new four-year degrees, students were allowed a maximum of six years. If they failed to graduate at the end of this period, students would be denied the right to register as official students any more! The setting up of a second tier in university education was innovative. This phase allowed "selected students" (Bijleveld 1989: 34) to continue their education if they so wished. For that purpose, four new programmes were set up covering different domains (professional courses, medical courses, teacher training and research fellowships) lasting between 1 (teacher training) and four years (research-fellowships).

Concentratie - STC) aimed at rationalising the HBO-sector (Spee and Brouwershaven 1988). The disparate picture of the HBO-sector had to be changed and economies of scale favoured, mainly through mergers (Goedegebuure 1989). What is important to recall of the STC operation is the way it was implemented. Implementation radically departed from the traditional central planning and followed the policy belief that the sector knew best. An informant summarised this change in policy beliefs in the following terms:

> "I have always said that the point was not that there was control, control can be modernised but, of course, there has to be control, if you spend a lot of money. The point was that there was much less bureaucratic planning. The best example was the re-design of the HBO-sector. It was not the Minister who from behind a desk that would [decide what institutions were going to merge with each other]. The Minister laid down the framework, set the targets. For instance, it had to be done in four years and it should not cost too much money. In addition, a quality assurance system had to be developed, etc. It would be discussed in the HBO-Raad, as the representative body of all the institutions, and then implemented. The Minister would observe, of course, but the point was that the planning was no longer bureaucratic but was based on the shared values, perspectives and ambitions of the sector itself, [although] knowing what the minister and society demanded."
>
> 3.IV.g.8

1983 also witnessed the introduction of the conditional funding system for research. This system was intended to foster accountability and to increase the quality of the research carried out at universities (van Vught 1991: 118). The objectives were twofold. First, it was intended to subject research funds to objective indicators such as the scientific quality and relevance for societal needs. The research programmes had to be externally approved if they were to be included in the conditional funding system and the assessment processes of the projects would be used for the reallocation of funds across the institutions (Goedegebuure and Westerheijden 1991: 449). Second, the government aimed to introduce an external system of quality assessment of research and, more importantly, to raise a general discussion about the priorities in research (Goedegebuure *et al.* 1994: 199). From this perspective, the conditional funding system is relevant for the purpose of the present study inasmuch as it laid down the foundations for the development of quality assurance procedures in HE as a whole. It was the first time external quality assessment was introduced in HE, which had an important impact in getting the academic community used to external scrutiny (Bijleveld and Goedegebuure 1989).

If retrenchment and structural change were the two drivers of the corrective reforms, enhanced institutional autonomy was that of the second set of policies launched by the Dutch government,

the facilitative reforms. These were introduced in the second half of the 1980s and aimed at transforming the relationships between the government and the universities.

The starting point of these new policies can be traced back to the publication, in 1985, of the policy document Dutch Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality (*Dutch Hoger Onderwijs: Autonomie en Kwaliteit* - HOAK). This document sketched out the new landscape for Dutch HE. The core idea of the HOAK document was to substitute tight regulations and planning procedures with self-regulation, which would allow HE to be more responsive to societal demands. This ideational core was to be supported by three principal instruments (Maassen and van Vught 1989: 117-119; Maassen *et al.* 1993: 143-147). The first was the creation of nine educational sectors to which governmental steering would be directed. Within these sectors, the institutions would be able to decide what subject to teach and, if appropriate, what areas to investigate. The second instrument was the introduction of a new system of funding and planning. This would take the shape of a biennial planning structure incorporated, since 1987, in the Higher Education and Research Plans[80] (*Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek Plan* - HOOP). Finally, the HOAK document also institutionalised quality assessment as a means to counter-balance the increased institutional autonomy. From then on, institutional control would shift from *ex ante* to *ex-post* procedures. The transformation of the traditional governmental control started a new era in the steering of the HE system generally referred to as supervisory regulation (Maassen *et al.* 1993; van Vught 1991, 1994), although the extent to which HOAK's ideational core was indeed implemented can be questioned (van Vught 1997: 216-217).

These transformations were supported by a shift in the overall policy beliefs, especially as regards the pertinence of central planning as the best means to address policy change but also in the overall ideational approach to policy-making. The Christian Democratic Party's motto "responsible society" developed along more radical views on the role of the Dutch state and administration in the management of the different policy domains (Kickert 1995: 142).

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[80] The HOOP was to be implemented as follows: "In the first year of the cycle, the government produces the HOOP, in which problems and issues are set out which the minister believes require particular attention in the planning period. This 'agenda' is then discussed with the institutions. In the second year, the institutions produce their development plans, stating how they will address the issues raised and what their future course of action will be. The next HOOP in turn will address these plans and relate them to the present problems and issues, resulting in a new agenda." In this sense, the HOOP document provides an ideal governmental image of how HE should be in the future to which the institutional development plans respond (Goedegebuure and Westerheijden 1991: 501).

It is on the basis of this belief and within the policy context just described that new responses to the fundamental policy choices in quality assurance were going to be provided. The following pages provide a detailed account of how it was done and, by so doing, assess the role of the different factors identified in chapter 3 as potentially at play in the construction of the quality assurance policy domain.

6.6.2. Towards an Institution-Centred Model of Quality Assessment

The HOAK document laid down the foundations for a new philosophy in the way HE policy was approached. It encapsulated changes in the policy beliefs regarding both the validity of central planning in policy-making and the role of societal actors in the formulation and implementation of policies.

As regards quality assurance policy, the HOAK document asked universities and HBO-sector institutions to improve the then existing instruments in order meet governmental requirements. Two general principles were sketched out, both based on the proposals made in 1981. The first recalled that it was the responsibility of the universities to set up quality assessment procedures at the departmental, faculty and university levels. Statistical indicators had to play a crucial role in the validity of the evaluations procedures and civil society should somehow be involved in these procedures. The second proposal covered the external dimension of quality assessment. According to the HOAK, this was to be done by a HE Inspectorate. The latter was requested to set up different Assessment Committees that would be charged with the follow up of the procedures. The issue of statistical indicators was discussed within a group set up by the newly created VSNU[81] (Maassen 1987: 165). Indicators would allow, it was argued, for a better improvement of the quality of the educational provision while the political authorities saw them as a tool for future comparisons among the institutions. However, the universities were reluctant to accept the development of indicators or governmental control of their activities, through the Inspectorate (Klerk *et al.* 1998: 5-6). They argued that any type of quality assessment system had to be based upon internal self-evaluations undertaken by the institutions themselves. Soon after the publication of the HOAK document,

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[81] These were of 6 different types: quality of graduates, quality of student flow, quality of the student enrolment, quality of the available members of staff, quality of the educational organisation, quality of the educational improvement (Maassen 1987: 165; see also Dersjant 1993).

the VSNU set up a committee to work out the directions towards the establishment of procedures for quality assurance. One member of that group recalled that moment:

> "The idea [stated] in the document was that universities were responsible for internal quality assurance and internal evaluation and the minister would set up an Inspectorate to do the external assessment. It is important to [note] that the HBO sector was already [subjected to] an inspectorate [whereas] the universities had never had an Inspectorate. As far as I remember, the whole inspection for the universities started with only two or three people. There was an [early] comment on the HOAK document on whether those three people would be allowed to do the assessment [both internal and external]. In 1985, the association set up a steering group to develop the ideas present in the HOAK document. I was [a member] of that group and one of the first things [we did] was to develop the outlines and the ideas for the external quality assessment. Therefore, we went looking around the world [to see] what was happening..."
>
> 1.IV.i.20

Asked about the places he went to, this interviewee replied:

> "I had been to Australia where, at that time, they were doing some programme evaluations. We invited Herbert Kells here. He played an important role at the beginning. He said an important thing. He said "the window is open now and you have to shoot your rockets although you don't know in which direction they are going to go but you have to take action". He also said that we needed to take the lead ourselves. So we developed our first manual and proposed the first try out assessments. At that time, on the basis of the HOAK document, we [reached the agreement] with the ministry that the first responsibility for external [quality assessment] would be at the level of the universities and association."
>
> 1.IV.i.21

The procedures eventually agreed in April 1986 transposed into the domain of quality assurance the new philosophy developed in the HOAK document. It took former discrepancies into account but maintained the distinction between internal and external quality assessment. It made HE institutions, through their respective umbrella organisations, responsible for the development of quality assurance procedures based on a combination of internal and external elements. Autonomy was guaranteed but the political authorities retained the right to ensure that the procedures were indeed implemented.

> "Was this mainly the consensus? I don't know. You might also say that action from the universities prevent that Inspectorate [to come] with an elaborated manual. I think that the most important factor was the very quick reaction to the [HOAK] document and very quick try out for disciplines [to be assessed]. [This] demonstrated that the association was capable to do it and [to do it] in such a way that also ministers would accepted it as being good. I must say that nobody in our association expected that we could finish the whole project [of assessing] four disciplines all over the country and self-assessment and peer-review in one week time. It showed very clearly that universities took it seriously and, of course, the threat was that if we did not do it, the Inspectorate would and it [would] be worse."
>
> 1.IV.i.21

Institutional autonomy would therefore be preserved, in line with the principles of the HOAK document, while the government, via the HE Inspectorate, would supervise the whole exercise. An important element to point out here is the general atmosphere in which the discussions were embedded. Earlier, the chapter underlined the importance of accommodation in policy-making. Although it is difficult to exactly appreciate the extent to which this situation still prevailed in the early, mid-1980s several interviewees referred to consensus as a key feature of the context within which the new HE policy was formulated. One of them put it as follows:

> "It was the birth of the "polder model". A sort of "platform" was created to discuss the problems related to higher education between policy makers, the government and [NA representatives] of the sector. The role of this platform [Higher Education Chamber] at the time was important. Lots of problems were solved there and did not [need to go into a more open arena]. Much was done behind screens within that platform. It has a place where consensus could be reached before [the discussion was taken into the public domain]."
>
> 3.IV.hm.6

The consensual approach to policy-making in HE does not, however, allow for a complete understanding of the responses to the fundamental choices in quality assurance policy. For that reason, it gains from being related to the broader philosophy that was emerging from the new policy beliefs in the governing coalition of the time (CDA-VVD) in a context of budgetary crisis. The point has been made several times in this chapter that most of the changes that took place in HE coincided with changes in the policy style of the government, indeed, its policy beliefs. This resulted in the combination of the already mentioned reference to a "responsible society" with the belief of stopping central planning procedures and give room to sectoral organisations to take up the challenges. Kickert summarises this situation as follows:

> "The proposal of the Christian Democratic minister of education and science to decrease the regulatory command of government and to grant the institutions providing the social service "higher education" more freedom and self-responsibility, runs largely parallel to the more ideological idea of "responsible society."
>
> Kickert 1995: 142

Kickert's view is consistent with the experience of already mentioned advisor of the then Minister of Education. This informant recalled that:

> 'In that period, the big challenge was how to combine a very tough financial situation (about fifteen per cent real cost in one four year cabinet period, which was draconian and we knew it) with important changes that had to be made regarding quality control and also the efficiency of the system. If it [was] done purely in a financial [perspective] it would not work,

> so the idea was that the system had to be made more efficient also from the inside. The idea was that the system had to be given more autonomy, and to be asked to prove its quality before it got its money, which was the philosophy behind this, rather than the government telling [the system] what to do and what quality was. (...) So the choice was a bit stark, they could get the budget cuts through bureaucratic interventions we are going to tell the ministry what to do and where to cut, which [would have been the old fashion]. Or we could also say, "there is less money than you were used to but it's yours if you prove your quality, and you have lots more autonomy you can do it yourself."
>
> 3.IV.g.1

The combination of the consensual approach to policy-making and profound changes in the overall policy beliefs, presided over the construction of the quality assurance policy domain in the Netherlands.

As regards the universities, it was agreed that the procedures would concentrate on clusters of study programmes or disciplines[82] assessed every five years. Following the HOAK, the internal assessments were going to be reinforced and turned into the first stage of the procedures, for which the institutions would be responsible (Vroeijenstijn 1992: 129-131). This second stage would take the form of an assessment of study programmes by an external committee appointed by the VSNU (Vroeijenstijn 1992: 120). Emphasis was put on the formative-oriented procedures, which indicates that there was no intention to develop quantitative approaches that could result in rankings of the programmes being made. Rather, the principal belief upon which the procedures were based was the generation of a constructive dialogue between the departments' members and the external reviewers according to the objectives the former had fixed for their study programme. From there, the internal self-evaluations and external on-site visits would permit the assessment of whether these objectives were adequate and shared by those involved in the programme. The committee's reports were drafted once all the programmes had been assessed and were made publicly available. The second part of the external scrutiny would take place via the HE Inspectorate. This was then made responsible for the meta-evaluation, which was concerned with the assessment of the "carefulness with which the entire quality assurance system is set up by the institutions" (Kalkwijk 1992: 103).

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82 For instance, the review of geography in 1989 included social geography, physical geography, pre- and proto-history, urban planning and demography (Vroeijenstijn 1992: 116). Some experiences of internal quality assurance procedures existed before the publication of the HOAK document. These procedures were not as systematised as those proposed in the HOAK document but had nonetheless led to some interesting experiences such as the AMOS system of the Free University Amsterdam (van Os *et al.* 1987).

These were the general instruments devised for quality assurance policy in Dutch universities. In 1987, a series of pilot evaluations were carried out. The outcomes were positive and in 1988 the first round of quality assessment procedures began. They were going to last until 1993.

The non-university sector was no exception to the development of quality assurance policies. Rather, HBO-sector institutions were included in the new philosophy professed by the HOAK document and, therefore, had to formulate their own instruments for quality assurance. This was to be done within a new legal framework inasmuch as the sector was taken out of secondary education by the passing of the 1986 HBO-Act. The new legislation meant that the HBO-sector institutions were no longer subject to external scrutiny from the Education Inspectorate but were treated as equal partners to the universities.
The instruments first developed, however, did not follow identical features as those adopted by the universities. Rather than concentrating on study programmes, the areas originally covered by the HBO-sector procedures were the institutions as a whole. However, the first experiences were somewhat disappointing and led the HBO-Raad to change the focus of the procedures on to the field of study, which was a similar model to that developed by the VSNU. The procedures followed an internal/external methodology similar to the one developed in the university sector presented above.

Quality assurance policy was under way by the second half of the 1980s. In 1993, it went a step further when the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW) came into force. The WHW subsumed into a single legal structure the entire set of regulations ruling Dutch HE. As regards quality assurance policy, it defined the general objectives of the different sectors of HE and regulated the procedures. It reaffirmed the principle of self-regulation and made clear that responsibility for quality assurance rested with the institutions (MOCW 1993: § 1.18). It also mentioned that students' opinion had to be taken into account during the procedures and that the reports had to be made public.

1993 also marked the end of the first phase of quality assessment process in the university sector. Since first implemented in 1988, the procedures had allowed for the development of a "culture of quality", even if the actual use of the information collected during the procedures varied substantially from one place to the other (Frederiks *et al.* 1994a). The second cycle ran

from 1994 to 1999. A number of changes were introduced in the instruments used during the first cycle, which reflects changes in the responses to the fundamental choices. These changes aimed principally at meeting governmental concerns regarding the need for greater accountability. The first cycle had emphasised the formative dimension of the procedures, thus subordinating the entire policy to the objective of improving the quality of teaching. However, governmental pressures could not be ignored much longer (Vroeijenstijn 1994: 100). The main issue of debate was the definition of accountability and of the instruments to provide it. Although the universities considered that their annual reports to the government were already a proof of their accountability, they agreed to modify the central objectives of the quality assurance policy in order to integrate the accountability concerns. The formative dimension remained the prime objective of the policy, which now also aimed at providing "a good view of the quality of education" (Vroeijenstijn 1994: 101). An interviewee recalled that period:

> "As an association, we have always said that the improvement function is the most important and still is. However because the minister and the Inspectorate are [stressing] more and more the accountability [dimension], there is always a struggle between outside rules and the universities as where to put the emphasis. That said, we kept the intention for improvements [and we accepted the need for accountability] because there were external pressures. [We tried to make clearer] what we meant by accountability. When we started the second round in 1993, we said what we meant by accountability and we adapted our way of reporting [accordingly]."
>
> 3.IV.g.29

Changes were introduced in the way the visiting committee was to report. Instead of waiting for all the programmes to be assessed before delivering their report, the committee would now record its findings in a Faculty Report straight after the visit. This would allow the institution concerned to take immediate action, if necessary. The VSNU presented in the following terms the new approach to accountability:

> "We think that we can meet the Minister's expectations by agreeing beforehand with the topics to be reported upon after the visits, and on the way this will be done. By reporting in this way, the faculties render account of specific aspects of their quality and quality management. At the same time, students get information about their education. And simultaneously the environment gets a picture of strengths and weaknesses of the study programme."
>
> Vroeijenstijn 1994: 101

The changing attitude of the VSNU unveiled a greater attention to be paid to stakeholders as regards the objectives of quality assurance policy. Although remaining formative, the policy instruments were to be increasingly used as an information tool for society at large. This trend was further reinforced by the emphasis put on the quantifiable data to be included in the

new assessment procedures. In this sense, the committees would now have to inform on six quantitative indicators[83], which would allow for a comparison among the different institutions included in the study programme. In addition, another set of more qualitative aspects would be compared and ranked on a five-grade scale (Vroeijenstijn 2000).

The changes in the use of the information collected for a substantial part of the shift towards greater accountability. This shift is accompanied by concerns for the provision of information to society at large and more particularly to prospective students. It has emerged as an issue in recent years, especially within the government and the HE Inspectorate. This has had two important consequences. The first is the interest showed in the provision of information through formal publications for students. These come on top of reports from the visiting committee reports and are an attempt to provide straightforward information on the quality of Dutch HE[84]. The second has been an investigation by the Dutch National Audit Office into the overall policy domain. From this investigation it emerged that the use of the information by the institutions was not always consistent. Rather, as the person in charge of the investigation put it:

> "The primary question was whether the way the Inspectorate [controlled] the system was appropriate to the minister to ensure public accountability. It was not enough to answer that question if the efficiency was to be analysed. It was almost important to look into the effectiveness of the system. It was important to look at how the actual recommendations were implemented in the universities.
> The main conclusions were that if a department got a 6, the average grade they would stop struggling for quality. Only those who did not score well would worry. So, it seemed that a new input was needed to make others aware that 6 was not enough. And this is where we are now."
>
> 3.IV.hm.10

Where we are now is a period of transition marked by the internal evolution of the policy instruments in both sectors combined with the parallel changes taking place at the international level. All the interviewees have, in one way or another, recognised the importance of current international trends on the issue of quality assurance. In this sense, the

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83 These were: the number of students attending a programme, the ratio of pass and fail, the average length of study, the study load, the number of staff as well as the student/staff ratio

84 These publications are the "Guide to Chose your Studies" (*Keuzegids Hoger Onderwijs*) and the Elsevier magazine yearly publication "the Best Study Programs (Vroeijenstijn 2000). The methodology upon which these guides are prepared is, according to all the Dutch interviewees, inconsistent. In addition, the differences between study programmes are minimal, thus questioning the argument that students can make a (rational) choice regarding their place of study, if they are provided with objective information. It is also significant to note that the first guide is funded by the MOCW.

future orientations seem to go towards the introduction of an accreditation system from 2002, although a more realistic date would be 2003/04. The importance of the international context for future developments in quality assurance policy is confirmed by a policy advisor at the HBO-Raad for whom:

> "The Declaration says that there should be a European dimension to quality assurance. I think that the whole accreditation issue has been brought further because of the Declaration. It is clearly the way that the Minister wants to move to. It is his intention to introduce a bachelor/masters structure and an accreditation system based on standards, which have to be international standards".
>
> 1.IV.e.6

The shift towards an accreditation system also owes something to internal changes in the MOCW. As another interviewee pointed out, the appointment of a new Minister of Education in 1998 made the idea possible and even recommendable. What is remarkable among the proposals that have been made is that the different institutions of HE will be free to choose the body that would undertake the assessment irrespective of sectoral or national constraints. This point is further discussed in chapter 9.

6.7. Summary and Provisional Conclusions

Recent history of Dutch HE has, thus, been marked by profound transformations. These were multifaceted and affected different aspects of the policy domain. Relationships between the MOCW and the institutions of HE were modified as were the patterns and timing of control. The overall sector of HE was re-shaped first through the upgrading of vocational schools into formal HE institutions and, then, through the adoption of a common legal framework for the entire system. The issue of quality assurance was one of the *fils rouges* of these developments, an issue that came out of these transformations and that progressively evolved into a formal policy in and for HE. As shown, quality assurance emerged on the political agenda at the turn of the 1970s as a result of the combination of several factors. On the one hand, there were factors external to the domain of HE. These related to the consequences of the economic recession and to a shift in the beliefs of the then governing coalition as regards the best means to confront the crisis and the role to be left to societal organisations. On the other hand, there were factors internal to the domain of HE: increasing number of new-entrants, high dropout rates, poor co-ordination among the institutions and management deficiencies were the most significant.

In this sense, quality assurance was put on the policy agenda as part of a wider policy programme aimed at the radical transformation of HE. Several policy documents of the early and mid-1980s illustrate this trend. They were reviewed in some detail in order to highlight how the shape taken by the quality assurance policy domain fitted within the broader policy orientations. As for the emergence of the issue, the responses to the fundamental policy choices in the domain of quality assurance combined internal and external factors. The external factors were best characterised by the shift in the policy style that happened in the Cabinets of the late 1970s and of the 1980s. Governing coalitions during that period were characterised by the continuous presence of the CDA, and the important role played by the Liberals. These two parties formed a coalition in three of the six Cabinets during the period 1977-1994. In terms of policy style and policy beliefs, their influence was most noticeable during the period that saw the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue and the early debates around the shape the policy had to adopt. The old central planning was abandoned in favour of what came to be known as the *steering-at-a-distance* style. Combined with a consensual approach to policy-making inherited from the politics of accommodation, the new policy style granted representatives of the sector a wide room for manoeuvre for the implementation of the decisions adopted.

Quality assurance was no exception to this way of proceeding. Rather, as a core element of the whole new policy orientations, it was considered a shared prerogative of the institutions and the MOCW. In the debates that surrounded the division of competencies, the institutions themselves came up with a clear design of the instruments to be used and under whose responsibility they were going to be placed. Factors internal to the HE system have, thus, been important via the umbrella organisations that acted as buffers and representatives of their respective segments. Despite differences in their origins and internal management features, the latter have not diverged much as regards the policy instruments devised.

Chapter 7 Spain

7.1. Introduction

In the last quarter of century, Spain underwent a period of profound transformations of which the most significant were the consolidation of democratic institutions, the political reorganisation of the state and the expansion of the economy. HE was no exception to these changes. Rather, it was ranked high on the political agenda during the first years of the political transition (Quintanilla 1995: 131). The early centre-right governments and the Socialist Party, then in opposition, had plans to reform HE on the principle of institutional autonomy guaranteed by the 1978 Constitution. These plans were eventually encompassed in the 1983 University Reform Act (*Ley de Reforma Universitaria* – LRU). The Act provided the bases for the future developments of HE policy as well as the rights and responsibilities of the central government, the regions and the institutions. Within this legal framework, the University was described as a "public service" belonging not solely to the academic community but to society at large (BoE 1983: Foreword). Later, the chapter will discuss the impact of the LRU on the construction of the quality assurance policy domain. For the moment, suffice to note that the Act did not make provision for any systemised procedures but limited itself to mention the need for the assessment of individual academics (BoE 1983: § 45.3). This legal vacuum would not, however, prevent the setting up of several projects in the domain of quality assurance policy and the establishment of a nation-wide evaluation programme in 1995, the National Evaluation Plan of the Quality of Universities (*Plan Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad de las Universidades* - PNECU).

How this was achieved is analysed in this chapter. Section 7.2 discusses the most salient political and societal features in the Spanish context and their impact on the organisation of policy domains. Then, section 7.3 presents the Spanish HE system. It is followed by an outline of the actors involved in the formulation and implementation of HE policy and their role in quality assurance in section 7.4. Then, the chapter turns to the analysis of the quality assurance policy domain. First, the current structure of the quality assurance policy domain is discussed in section 7.5. After that section 7.6 engages in a narrative of how this structure

emerged and highlights the role of national and international factors in this process. Finally, section 7.7 summarises the main conclusions that can be drawn from the Spanish experience.

7.2. Political and Societal Features in Spain

Spain is nowadays a decentralised state where political powers are shared between the central and the regional governments. The following paragraphs discuss the most salient political and societal features of the Spanish State and how they impact on policy making in HE.

7.2.1. The State of Autonomies

The current institutional structure of the Spanish State derives from the combination of two processes (Puelles-Benitez 1996: 165). The first is the horizontal division of power among the executive, the legislative and the judicial powers. This process started soon after Franco's death and marked the beginning of the political transition that would lead, in 1977, to the first democratic elections in four decades. The horizontal division of power is one of the traditional features of the democratisation of a country. What makes the Spanish experience particular is that it was accompanied by a process of vertical division of power, which provided newly created entities, the Autonomous Communities, with political competencies. These two processes deeply marked the construction of the new Spanish State. At their heart was the 1978 Constitution (BoE 1978). The latter was the consensual outcome of intense negotiations among political parties and aimed to avoid the political paralysis that characterised the Second Republic (1931-1936) and that could re-emerge because of the proportional electoral system. To that end, the executive government, especially the Prime Minister, was granted extensive powers, such as the priority of its bills and the possibility of issuing decree-laws (Heywood 1992, 1999). The President heads the executive and leads the Council of Ministers. In addition, the executive directs the administration, placed under increasing political control, especially the highest positions.

Within an executive-centred institutional structure, the Parliament is left with few prerogatives, especially when the ruling party enjoys a working majority. The Parliament is composed of two Houses: the Congress of Deputies and the Senate. Both can introduce and modify bills, although it is the Congress that, in case of disagreement, retains the last word. Several Commissions are present in the Parliament and carry on a large part of the legislative discussion.

The concentration of power within the executive means that the political structure of the Spanish state presents some similarities with the British. However, in contrast to this latter case, the power of the executive is undermined by that of the regions and the subsequent political decentralisation (Aparicio 1999: 30-50; Colomer 1999: 41-48; Jaria i Manzano 1999: 16-23; Moxon-Browne 1989: 40-66).

In the following paragraphs, the discussion concentrates on the impact of this political decentralisation on policy making with particular emphasis on HE.

7.2.2. The State of Autonomies and the Organisation of the Policy Domains

As noted, the 1978 Constitution made provision for the establishment of seventeen *Comunidades Autonomas* (Autonomous Communities – CCAA) with competencies in several policy domains. Soon after the passing of the LRU, six Communities were granted competencies in HE, whereas the remainder stayed under the control of the central Ministry of Education until 1992, when they progressively gained responsibilities too (Embid-Irujo 1998: 15-20). The reasons for the differences are both political and economic. For the so-called "historical" Communities[85], taking over political prerogatives was a crucial element in the struggle for legitimacy, which had to be made even at a high financial cost. The financial cost was the principal factor that dissuaded many other regions to take up responsibility of their own universities. The transfer of competencies in HE policy was completed by the end of 1996.

As regards education, the Article 27 of the Constitution made provision for three main elements (Garcia-Garrido 1992: 666; Lamo de Espinosa 1993: 88). First, receiving education was presented as a right, as was the freedom to teach and to establish (higher) educational institutions. Second, basic education was made compulsory. Third, the autonomy of the universities was guaranteed (BoE 1978: § 27.10). The Article 149 fixed the competencies of

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[85] The term *historical Communities* refers to those Communities that held plebiscites on autonomy in the 1930s. These were the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, they Communities re-held a referendum on their statutes of autonomy, together with Andalucia (Colomer 1996: 200).

central and regional governments as regards HE, which were later framed within the 1983 LRU[86] (Maravall 1985: 67-74; Trillas 1983).

The LRU aimed at implementing the political and educational principles the 1978 Constitution had formulated for Spanish HE, in particular the fact that this policy domain was now a shared responsibility of the central government, the CCAAs and the universities (Boyd-Barrett 1995: 249). In this sense, the Act aimed to free the universities from the previous rigid central bureaucratic control (Sánchez-Ferrer 1997), which was similar to the then emerging trend among several European countries for greater institutional autonomy and revised forms of control. In the Spanish context, the LRU considered institutional autonomy as the means to guarantee diversification of the system and, concomitantly, to increase quality:

> "(...) the university system that will result from the progressive application of the present Act will be characterised by a diversification among Universities, which will stimulate, no doubt, competition among them to reach the highest levels of quality and excellence, even if a minimal homogeneous quality is guaranteed for all national Universities."[87]
>
> BoE 1983: Foreword

The LRU, however, remained silent as regards the instruments that would have to be developed to ensure that such general objectives of quality were met. Whereas several European countries were linking together the notions of institutional autonomy with that of accountability, mainly through systematised policies for quality assurance, the LRU only mentioned the evaluation of individual members of staff, to be carried out by the universities[88]. It will be shown below how this was effectively implemented, the problems it led to and how individual evaluations were, progressively, abandoned for more encompassing

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86 Previous attempts had failed under the centre-right governments that followed the end of the dictatorship. Only after the Socialist party of Felipe González won the 1982 general elections could the LRU find sufficient political and social support to be adopted (McKenna 1985: 464).

87 Personal translation. The original quote runs as follows: "(...) el sistema de universidades que resulta de la aplicación progresiva de esta Ley se caracterizará por una diversificación entre las Universidades, que estimulará, sin duda, la competencia entre las mismas para alcanzar niveles más altos de calidad y excelencia, si bien se garantiza una calidad mínima homogénea para todas las Universidades nacionales" (BoE 1983: Foreword).

88 The LRU expressed this view in the following terms: "University's Statutes will define the procedures for periodical evaluation of the staff's teaching and scientific performance, which will be taken into account for the competitions referred to in the articles thirty five and thirty nine, as regards continuity and promotion". The original quote runs as follows: "Los Estatutos de la Universidad dispondrán los procedimientos para la evaluación periódica del rendimiento docente y cientifico del profesorado, que será tenido en cuenta en los concursos a que aluden los artículos treinta y cinco a treinta y nueve, a efectos de su continuidad y promoción" (BoE 1983: § 45.3).

procedures. In order to fully understand this process, it is important to bear in mind how the LRU distributed responsibilities among the three levels (Martorell-Pallás 1999: 5-7).

The attributions of the central government concern the definition of the general conditions on free access and teaching in universities, the nature of the academic staff and basic legislation as regards teaching and learning (Embid-Irujo 1998: 46). This includes, for instance, the formulation of unified criteria for the selection, promotion and retribution of academic staff in all public universities (BoE 1983: § 46.1 & 45.2; González-Hernández 1991: 42). As regards the curriculum, the central political authorities can define the curricula of the courses having a nation-wide validity as well as the conditions to obtain them (BoE 1983: § 28.1). For that purpose, they follow the recommendation of the *Consejo de Universidades* (Council of Universities – CU, see below).

The prerogatives of the CCAAs are of two different kinds: those deriving from the application of the general guidelines of the LRU and those stemming from the political nature of the Regions (González-Hernández 1991: 42). The former include the accreditation of new universities and the approval of universities' statutes. The competencies stemming from the political nature of the CCAAs include the appointment of the president of the University's Social Council[89] and the 3/5th of its members, the appointment of the Rector, on the basis of a decision previously taken by the university itself, and the determination of the tuition fees according to the guidelines fixed by the CU (González-Hernández 1991: 40). As a result of the decentralisation of the state, the CCAA can also formulate their own university policy. They all dispose of a Ministry of Education responsible for the ruling and funding of their respective institutions (1.III.b.5; 1.III.dm.4). The actual prerogatives of the regional governments need, nonetheless, to be relativised in the light of the extended institutional autonomy granted by the LRU (Embid-Irujo 1998: 22).

Finally, as regards the universities, their autonomy can be seen in the fact that they are allowed to formulate their own statutes and appoint their own governing bodies. They are also

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[89] The Social Councils are common features in Spanish universities. Their role is to develop the links between HE institutions and society at large. Within the university, their principal task is to approve the budget and programmes proposed by the University Board (*Junta de Gobierno*). The Social Councils are composed by academics (40% including the Rector) and by external personalities (60%). The actual relevance of this

responsible for the management of their budget and for the relationships with other institutions (González-Hernández 1991: 39-40; see also Sánchez-Ferrer 1996: 229-232). As far as teaching is concerned, Spanish universities are also responsible for the formulation of the study programmes, the admission procedures and the evaluation of student's knowledge, the selection and training of academic staff and for delivering degrees.

This section has outlined the political structure of the Spanish State. Political decentralisation is an important process that impacted on the way prerogatives over policy domains are shared between the central and regional governments. In HE the distribution of the political competencies is complemented with a large degree of institutional autonomy. The chapter now continues with a presentation of the Spanish HE system.

7.3. The Spanish System of Higher Education

The Spanish HE system is predominantly composed of universities[90]. In 1999, there were 63 universities spread throughout the territory (CU 1999b: 31). They accommodated about 1.6 million students, more than twice as many as in 1983, when the LRU was passed. It is worth noting, however, that the wave of expansion has come to an end and the system is now reaching a period of consolidation. In contrast to the other countries analysed in the present study, Spain shows a substantial proportion of non-public providers of HE. In fact, 14 universities are run either by the private sector (10) or the catholic Church (4). The difference between public and private providers of HE has not influenced the formulation of quality assurance policy. Rather, the instruments that have been developed apply to both types of institutions.

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body within the university governance is unclear due "in part to a lack of tradition and in part to an unclear legal definition of its role" (Mora 1997a: 189).

90 It is worth noting that besides the universities, Spanish HE encompasses two other sectors. Cebreiro (1996: 265) distinguishes between two main types of non-university HE institutions, those offering programmes assimilated to those offered by the universities (in tourism, music, etc) and those that do not (civil aviation or restoration of works of art). All these institutions depend either on the central government (for instance: military instruction) or the autonomous regions (for instance: tourism). Non-university HE in Spain is also provided through vocational education. Courses in vocational education are regulated by the 1990 Act on the General Regulation of the Educational System (*Ley de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo* - LOGSE). The length of these vocational courses varies. Students having successfully completed two-year courses are awarded the grade of *técnico superior*. It must be underlined that due to the limited expansion of a real sector of higher vocational education in Spain, universities have generally taken up most of these educational activities, generally through short-cycle courses. Because of the particular structure and the small size of the non-university sector in Spanish HE, the study does not address them any further.

Spanish universities present a wide institutional diversity where academic study programmes are offered alongside vocational ones. This has led to the creation of a range of units[91]. This internal diversity is not found as far as the organisational features of Spanish universities are concerned.

Access to university education is restricted to those students having passed the *selectividad*[92]. Upon completion of compulsory education, students can attend two additional years of upper secondary education. At the end of these two years, students wishing to enter HE need to take an entrance examination providing a selectivity score. It is used to assign students to programmes according to their own preferences but also to the number of places available. Access to university education is, however, not guaranteed but is limited by a *numerus clausus*. The limitation of access is also present under the so-called *distrito compartido* (shared district). This system allows each CCAA to limit the university places available for students from other regions. The number of places available is decided every year. In December 1999, the CU endorsed a governmental decision to abolish this practice and to open up access to any university to all Spanish students. The then Minister of Education supported this decision arguing that it would force universities to be better managed and would increase competition among them (*El Mundo*, 17.12.1999).

7.4. Actors Involved in Spanish Higher Education Policy

This section presents the different actors involved in the process of HE policy formulation and implementation and their respective roles in the domain of quality assurance.

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91 These can be divided into four categories, according to the length of study and the type of degree awarded. First, the *facultades universitarias* (university faculties) provide all but technological courses and offer long-cycle degrees leading to the title of *licenciado* after five or six years. The university faculties also offer doctoral training. Second, the *escuelas tecnicas superiores* (higher technical schools) are the equivalent of the university faculties for engineering and architecture. They also offer long-cycles degrees leading to the title of engineer or architect and the doctorate in both disciplines. Third, the *escuelas universitarias* (university schools) specialised in short-cycle programmes, whose duration is normally of three years, leading to the title of *diplomado* (graduate). These courses constitute the first level of university education and encompass a substantial part of vocational/professional training. Fourth, the *colegios universitarios* (university colleges) concentrate on the first level of university studies in each discipline and are registered with a specific university.

92 The *selectividad* combines the score obtained at the entrance exam and the average score obtained during the last year of secondary education. While this study was written, the MES announced the abolition of the *selectividad*, although no exact date for that has been fixed yet. In future, each university would be able to determine its own criteria for the selection of students (*El Pais*, 20.04.2001; *El Mundo* 20.04.2001)

7.4.1. The Ministry for Education, Culture and Sport (*Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deportes* - MEC)

In contrast to other decentralised countries, Spanish central administration disposes of an important Ministry for Education. If this was understandable when the central government was responsible for the HE policy, such a situation appears inappropriate nowadays. Despite the political transformation of the country and the consequences this had on policy-making in HE, the structure of the MEC has not evolved in the same direction (Puelles-Benitez 1996: 187). In terms of responsibilities, it is also worth mentioning that nowadays, the MEC is responsible for the Open University and the International University Menéndez Pelayo.

The Spanish Ministry of Education has changed names and areas of activities over the period analysed in the present study. Traditionally, it as been known has the Ministry of Education and Science. In 1996 it was renamed Ministry of Education and Culture with powers in the domains of Education and Science (BoE 1996). To these competencies, those regarding sport activities were added in 2000. As regards the organisational structure, the MEC has a Secretary of State for Education, Universities and Development with substantial prerogatives in the domain of HE, among which are liaison with the CU (Garcia-Garrido 1992: 670). As regards quality issues, the MEC was responsible for the development of assessment procedures of the research and teaching activities of tenured academics since the late 1980s. It also played a role in the developments that took place as a result of these early experiences, although the bulk of the procedures were carried out by the CU.

7.4.2. The Council of Universities (*Consejo de Universidades* - CU)

The Council of Universities is the prime consultative body of the government as regards HE policy. It was created by the 1983 LRU (BoE 1983: § 23, 24) and its statutes were adopted in Parliament in 1985 (BoE 1985a, b). Among its responsibilities, one can point out the general co-ordination of the system of HE, the definition of the curriculum - for the courses valid all over the territory - as well as to control students' access to universities. In addition, the Council also advises the central government on issues such as the creation of a new university (BoE 1985a: § 1).

The CU can be regarded as a federal chamber where representatives of the different powers - central government, CCAAs and universities - involved in HE policy can meet and work problems out. The Council's composition consequently reflects the intricate interests at play. It encompasses the Heads of University Ministries of each Community, the Rectors of all

public universities and 15 appointed members (5 each for the Senate and the Congress and 5 for Executive Government) (BoE 1985a: § 6.1). This composition highlights the close relationship existing between the Council and the central government (Perkins 1990: 26). The Council is chaired by the Minister of Education who also appoints the General Secretary. The link with the political arena is further reinforced by the fact that the CU's vice-chairman is the Secretary of State for Universities and Research (CU 1988: 48). Later in the chapter, some of the dangers of such close relationships will be discussed with regard to quality assurance.

Located within a political structure characterised by an increasing decentralisation of policy responsibilities, the CU has been regarded as the unique body able to provide some kind of co-ordination to the system. It can therefore be seen as the principal buffer between the political authorities and the universities in a decentralised political system. Among the Council's activities, quality assurance occupied an important part in recent years. The different experiences undertaken by the Council during the late 1980s and early 1990s stemmed from the statutory obligation to promote the improvement of teaching and research and to ensure that the objectives stated in the LRU were met (BoE 1985a: Annexe § 1). Later, the chapter will discuss how this was done.

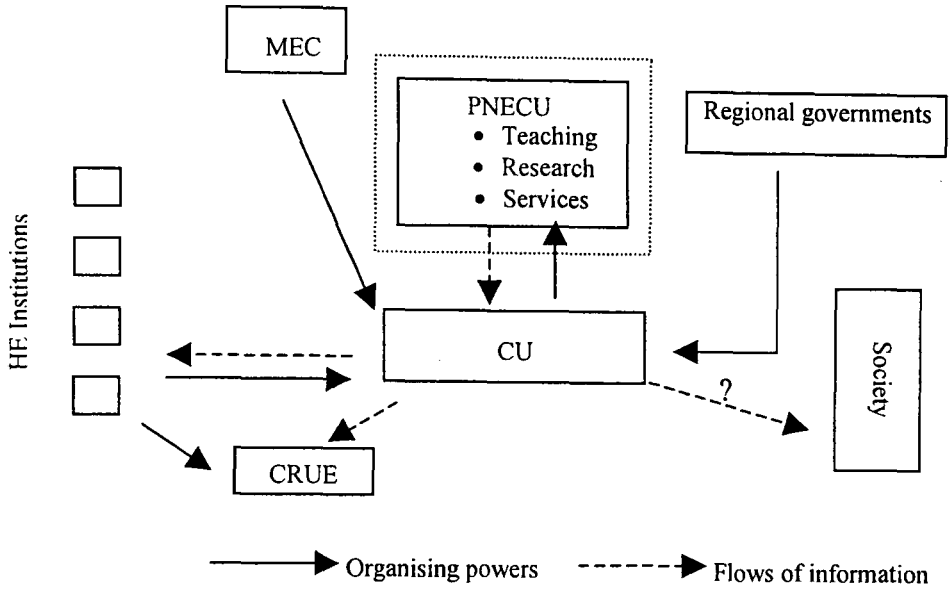
7.4.3. The Conference of Spanish Universities' Rectors (*Conferencia de Rectores de las Universidades Españolas* – CRUE)

At the system level, the CRUE is the most visible body. It constitutes a forum for debate and information for the universities. In recent years, the CRUE has also played a role in supporting the policy formulated for quality assurance. This was especially true after the 1996 general elections, when the appointed Ministry for Education and Culture was more than reluctant to support the experience that was being carried out.

More recently, the CRUE has been at the forefront of public and political debates after having commissioned the preparation of the Spanish equivalent of the English *Dearing Report*. The final report, *Universidad 2000*, was published in March 2000 (Bricall *et al.* 2000; *El Mundo* 23.03.1999; *El Pais* 03.04.2000, THES 05.06.1998). It was expected to be the point of departure for major transformations of Spanish HE although little has been done with its conclusions so far.

This section has presented the most important actors at play in HE policy in the Spanish context. Figure 7.1 outlines their relationships in the domain of quality assurance.

FIGURE 7.1. RELATIONSHIPS AMONG ACTORS IN THE DOMAIN OF QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY IN SPANISH HIGHER EDUCATION



Later in the chapter, the discussion will highlight in more detail the role of the different actors in the domain of quality assurance policy. This will be done in section 7.6. Before that, the issue of quality assurance is first addressed by looking at the responses to the fundamental choices as observable nowadays.

7.5. Quality Assurance Policy in Spanish Higher Education: The Synchronic View

The name given to the Spanish experience is in itself a straightforward indication of how the entire domain is structured. In chapter 3, the areas that quality assurance policy can address were discussed. It was argued that, generally, three types of areas can be subject to scrutiny: teaching/learning, research and overall institutional management. These three dimensions have been thought of as forming part of an integrated whole, i.e. the institution, whose overall quality can be assessed only if the three elements are taken into consideration simultaneously. This way of approaching the quality assurance policy domain derives from the definition given to quality in the Spanish HE system. Here, the view has emerged that quality is the outcome of the appropriate combination of several factors that need to operate properly. These can be human factors, financial resources or material resources and need to be combined with the basic missions of the universities, teaching and research, and with

organisational and management features so that pre-defined objectives can be met (Rodríguez 1991: 46-56, 1998: 139-147; Garcia *et al.* 1995). As further discussed below, the development of this type of integrated approach to quality assurance can be seen as a reaction to the failure of former experiences based on the assessment of individuals only. From this derives the development of quality assurance as an *institutional evaluation*.

In the remainder of this section, the focus turns more explicitly to the responses to the fundamental choices in quality assurance in the Spanish context. In line with the other country reports, the discussion follows the categories outlined in chapter 3 and the synchronic and diachronic approach devised in chapter 4. The picture is taken at the end of the year 2000 after the conclusion of the first phase of the PNECU.

Objectives: emphasis on the formative dimension

The philosophy of the PNECU is based upon process-oriented mechanisms, although some emphasis is also put on the provision of information. The reasons for that can be found in the type of objectives that have been assigned to it. These objectives are derived from the Royal Decree that established the PCNE (BoE 1995: § 1). The CU defined these objectives as follows:

> - "Promotion of the *institutional assessment of standards* of Spanish universities with respect to the fields of teaching, research and other services that the university offers to society.
> - To provide universities and educational administration with *a standardized methodology and basic common criteria for the assessment of standards compatible* with that practised in Europe.
> - To provide society, especially current or future university students, with relevant and objective information on quality in Spanish universities, the different curricula, fields of scientific specialization and the kind of services they offer.
> - To provide educational authorities and the CU with objective information on the standards of quality reached by each university that can serve as a basis on which decisions can be adopted in the context of the respective areas."[93]
>
> CU 1995a: 23, emphasis in the original.

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[93] The original quote runs as follows:
- "Promover la evaluación institucional de la calidad de las universidades en los ámbitos de la enseñanza, la investigación y los servicios prestados a la sociedad;
- Facilitar a las universidades y a las administraciones educativas un método homogéneo y unos criterios básicos comunes para la evaluación, compatibles con la práctica vigente en la Unión Europea;
- Proporcionar a la sociedad, especialmente a los estudiantes universitarios actuales o potenciales, información relevante y objetiva sobre la calidad de las universidades españolas;
- objetiva sobre el nivel de calidad Proporcionar a las administraciones educativas y al Consejo de Universidades una información alcanzado que pueda servir de base para la adopción de decisiones en el ámbito de las respectivas competencias." (CU 1997: 8).

The importance of these general objectives goes beyond the issue of participation of the institutions. They are based on a key principle: quality assurance procedures aim at improving the quality of teaching, research and management and should not be directly linked to funding or accreditation policies (CU 1997: 9)[94].

Control: the universities and the CU together

Framed within the PNECU, the quality assurance policy domain is a responsibility of the central and regional governments together with the universities. On behalf of the central administration, the CU monitors the process to which all the universities, either public or private, can take part. As regards organisational features, the PNECU makes provision for the setting up of several committees within the CU and the participating institutions. The latter are asked to set up an Evaluation Committee (*Gabinete de Evaluación*) to coordinate the process within the institution (1.III.c.6/n). The former set up two different bodies: an Executive Commission and a Technical Committee, both under the responsibility of the General Secretary[95].

The process is scheduled over a five-year period (1996-2000). It is important to note that the regionalisation of policy-making has led some CCAAs to set up their own bodies responsible for quality assurance in their respective regional HE systems. Catalunya has been a precursor in this domain. Here, an Agency was set up in 1996 to coordinate the procedures undertaken in the universities of Catalunya and to promote the development of such procedures through the drafting of informative reports (DOGC 1996). The Catalan example has been followed by Andalucia, which recently set up its own Agency, and the Community of Madrid that was planning to do the same. These agencies monitor the involvement of their universities in the PNECU, through the previous selection of the proposed projects, and participate in the

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94 The original quote runs as follows: "El proceso de evaluación persigue facilitar el desarrollo de acciones concretas para mejorar la calidad de la Universidad y no esta vinculado directamente ni a consecuencias relacionadas con la financiación ni a procesos de acreditación administrativas" (CU 1997: 9).

95 The Executive Commission is responsible for the general coordination of the PNECU. Its complex composition reflects that of the CU itself and the many intricate interests present in the HE policy network. On the other hand, the Technical Committee is the key element in the procedures. It can be seen as a steering committee, structuring the procedures and assuming the follow up of the process. It is composed of seven experts in the field of evaluation and quality assurance. All of them are professors in Spanish universities and are appointed by the MEC on the advice of the CU (BoE 1996c). The Technical Committee is responsible for the following tasks: a) to adopt guidelines and norms for quality evaluation in the universities; b) to assess the quality and viability of the projects submitted by the institutions; c) to organise the training and preparation of the internal evaluators; d) to appoint the external evaluators; e) to collaborate with the General Secretary of the CU in the draft of the annual report on quality in Spanish universities and f) to advise the General Secretary on all themes related to the PNECU (CU 1997: 14-15).

funding (1.III.dm.4/n; 1.III.a.15). In addition, since 1998, the Catalan agency has been running yearly reviews of particular study areas (1.III.dm.2/n; AQ 1998, 1999).

Areas: institutional evaluation

As noted in the introduction to this section, the areas covered by the PNECU concentrate on teaching, research and the provision of services such as libraries. The areas to be evaluated are not determined beforehand but can be decided by participating institutions. In general, the calls for proposals distinguish among three types of projects. First are the thematic projects that encompass one or more degree courses in one or more universities and must last one year. In addition, global projects can also be proposed. These concentrate on the overall evaluation of one or more universities. Finally, special projects allow for the creation of evaluation units within the institutions. This latter type of project was proposed in the early years of the PNECU only.

Procedures: cyclical methodology and total voluntariness

The PNECU is based on a cyclical methodology whose starting point is the call for proposals published by the MEC. The institutions interested in participating can do so by submitting projects they wish to see taken into consideration. The successful projects would be funded by the central administration and, where appropriate, by the regional agencies for quality assurance (González-López 1999: 276; 1.III.dm.2).

Once the project has been launched, the first stage consists of the draft of an internal self-assessment report by the unit under scrutiny. For that purpose, the faculty appoints an Evaluation Committee (Mora 1997b: 66-67; CU 1999a: 33). The second stage is the external visit. This is undertaken by a Committee of Experts, appointed by the Technical Committee, composed of academic and non-academic members. The Expert Committee visits the evaluated unit and produces a report that is sent to the Technical Committee (Mora 1997b: 66). These two first stages form the bulk of the procedures. Once completed, the Technical Committee prepares a synthesis of both the self-assessment and the External Committee's reports. This final report is then sent to the evaluated university and to the regional government. Finally, a summary of the final report is normally published once the evaluated university has been consulted.

It is also important to note that taking part in the PNECU is not compulsory. Voluntariness was justified in the PNECU by the fact that Spanish universities were experiencing a phase

of consolidation, which would have made difficult the development of a culture of evaluation and quality improvement. The fact that universities are, by law, autonomous institutions also prevented the organisation of the PNECU on a compulsory basis (CU 1997: 9), which did not, however, reduce the impact of the experiment. Quite the opposite has actually happened. The second call for proposals in 1997 attracted responses from 82% of the universities (CU 2000a: 9), whereas all the universities, public and private, took part in the third call published in 1998 (1.III.b.5).

Uses: in the benefit of the institutions

The use of the information collected has to be understood within the overall objectives of the PNECU. In this sense, the information is re-immersed in the system to inform the participants in the procedures who learn from them. Behind this lies the increasing importance conceded to the following up of the results from a perspective of continuous improvement. The 1999 and 2000 calls for proposals have taken into consideration follow-up projects submitted by the institutions.

The extent to which participation in the procedures should have direct implications for the institutions is not clear, although the current policy framework rejects it. At the beginning, it seemed important for the members of the CU that some consequences should derive from the instruments to be formulated for quality assurance. This was made clear in the proposals submitted to the government (CU 1995a: 33). The proposals mixed general statements, such as the increase of society's knowledge of the different institutions' achievements, with more radical ones such as linking the results of the procedures to funding policies (CU 1995a: 33). These proposals were later dropped, thus leaving aside any type of explicit summative implications of the PNECU, something that might have prevented, according to the CU, some institutions from taking part in the procedures.

These responses to the fundamental choices structured the domain of quality assurance policy in December 2000. By then, the first phase of the PNECU had been completed. Behind it, remained five years of administrative efforts and personal involvement and four calls for proposals (Mora and Vidal 1999: 6).

The next section looks into the emergence of the PNECU as a systematised set of instruments for quality assurance policy in Spanish HE.

7.6. Quality Assurance Policy in Spanish Higher Education: The Diachronic View

On the 1st of December 1995, the Spanish Parliament adopted the Royal Decree officially establishing the PNECU (BoE 1995). After several months of negotiations within the CU, the road was opened to a continuous and co-ordinated process of quality assurance in Spanish HE. It was the CU that had sketched out the general structure of the PNECU during the summer of the same year. The following pages reconstruct the process that led to the setting up of the PNECU. The narrative pays particular attention to the overall context within which the PNECU took shape and aims to clarify the role played by the different factors identified in chapter 3.

7.6.1. The Policy Context

In the late 1980s, when the debate on quality assurance emerged, Spanish HE was undergoing a process of unprecedented growth. In 1997, the number of students attending HE was the double of that of 1983. By 1997, 55% of the 18 year-olds were enrolled, bringing the gross enrolment rate for 18-23 year-olds to 41% (Mora and Vidal 2000: 248). Tables 7.1 and 7.2 provide an overview of the expansion. The figures show that the student population in HE experienced a continuous growth since the early 1980s and even earlier (CU 1999b: 382). The increase is now slowing down and figures show that in 2001, there will be a reduction in the number of enrolled students (*El Pais* 08.05.2001).

As a first decision to meet the expansion, expenditure on HE grew steadily from 0.54% of the GDP in 1985 to 0.99% in 1994 and then to 1.2% by 1997 (OECD 2000: 56; see also Mora and García-Aracil 1999: 97-98). The financial resources invested in HE allowed for a rise in the number of institutions and an expansion of the academic offer[96].

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[96] On the one hand, of the 63 universities existing in 1999, 30 were established after the passing of the 1983 LRU. On the other hand, the number of courses available in Spanish universities grew by almost 300% in the period between 1982-83 and 1991-92, a process that especially benefited short-cycle courses where the offer increased by 230% (Oroval 1998: 19).

TABLE 7.1. STUDENTS ENROLLED IN SPANISH UNIVERSITIES 1979/80-1997/98

Source: personal elaboration from CU 1999b: 382; increases are own calculations.

TABLE 7.2. RATE OF PARTICIPATION IN SPANISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Source: Mora *et al.* 1999: 230

The current structure of the quality assurance policy domain has, thus, its roots in this context of expansion, itself a consequence of the overall transformations of Spanish polity and, in the domain of HE more specifically, the outcomes of the 1983 LRU.

As noted, the LRU did not particularly elaborate on the procedures that had to be set up to promote quality in Spanish universities. Rather, it addressed the issue of quality assurance indirectly as one of the outcomes of increased institutional autonomy. In this perspective, the LRU argued that Spanish universities had to be reformed and granted greater room for manoeuvre if they were to provide what society expected from them: teaching and research of the highest quality[97] (BoE 1983: Foreword). Nevertheless, the Act did pay some attention to

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[97] The LRU addressed this issue as follows: "Así pues, si la Constitución española hace imperativa la reforma, ésta es también imprescindible para que la Universidad pueda rendir a la sociedad lo que tiene derecho a exigir de aquélla, a saber: calidad docente e investigadora; algo que, sin embargo, sólo podrá ofrecer si le garantizan condiciones de libertad y de autonomía, pues sólo en una Universidad libre podrá germinar el pensamiento investigador, que es el elemento dinamizador de la racionalidad moderna y de una sociedad libre" (BoE 1983: Foreword). The original quote runs as follows: "Consequently, the Spanish Constitution makes the reform imperative; the reform is also indispensable to allow the University to give

academic staff whose activities were to be assessed by the institutions (BoE 1983: § 45.3 – see below). More generally, however, nowhere in the LRU would one find a reference to what was generally accepted in other systems of HE at that time, namely that increased institutional autonomy had to come along with clear measures for quality assurance and accountability (Mora *et al.* 1995: 391). The intention of controlling, in one way or another, universities' activities seems, consequently, to have been carefully omitted in the Spanish context.

This omission can be understood if one takes into consideration the political climate within which the LRU emerged and the need to find a workable consensus among political forces and academic interests to bring HE in line with the requirements of the 1978 Constitution. Other potential explanatory factors of the lack of relationship between institutional autonomy and quality may be found in the degree of development of the Spanish HE system or in the regionalisation of prerogatives over policy domains as contemplated in the Constitution and the LRU. On the one hand, Spanish universities had just emerged from four decades of dictatorship and tight political control (Carreras-Ares and Peset-Reig *Eds* 1991). Imposing new types of control, through *ex post* instruments of quality assurance or others, would simply not have been acceptable at that time. On the other hand, HE was one of the policy domains whose prerogatives were soon to be taken over by the CCAAs. Linking any expansion of institutional autonomy to quality assurance procedures or even accountability would not have been possible without the agreement of the Communities themselves. A third potential factor, although less explicit, that can help understand the limited concerns shown by the LRU about quality assurance could simply have been the unawareness of those actors involved in the elaboration of the Act and the actual lack of knowledge of what other countries were doing. This last point is supported by looking at the literature published during the first half of the 1980s: quality assurance was not an issue for writers on Spanish HE policy. More important were the institutional autonomy and the forms of internal governance[98].

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society what it can expect, i.e. teaching and research of the highest quality; something which, however, can only be provided if freedom and autonomy are guaranteed, inasmuch as only in a free University will the investigative thought arise, which is the dynamic element of modern rationality and free society".

98 Among the literature consulted for this study, it is remarkable that such a senior personality as the Minister of Education, J.-M. Maravall does not address the issue of quality in HE in one key publication of 1984 (Maravall 1984: 97-129 esp.; see also Maravall 1985). Other authors include: McKenna (1985) and Villanueva (1984).

Over the years, the lack of precise regulations would prevent neither the progressive development of institution-wide instruments for quality assurance nor the increasing participation of the different universities in these procedures. Admittedly, the provision made by the LRU for the evaluation of academic staff's teaching and research activities was the only legal constraint upon the institutions. From this requirement, and its limitations, would be derived the instruments and procedures that eventually crystallised in the PNECU[99]. The latter is currently the dominant approach in the domain of quality assurance in Spain. It is, as noted, based on so-called institutional evaluations where different key factors are addressed simultaneously. But this has not always been the case. This is why the following section looks into the process that led to its establishment in 1995.

7.6.2. Towards the PNECU

In Spain, the emergence of quality assurance as an issue was neither accompanied by a negative economic situation or by particularly negative signs emerging from the situation within the universities[100]. Rather, according to what has been discussed in the previous section, the origins of a set of systemised instruments for quality assurance in Spanish HE can be seen as the convergence of two trends. On the one hand was the establishment of the CU in 1985 and the statutory obligation it had to ensure the permanent improvement of teaching and research in HE (BoE 1985a: Annexe § 1). On the other hand, quality assurance policy was also gaining weight through the attempts of the Ministry of Education to develop the evaluation of tenured academic staff's teaching and research activities (Garreta-Torner 1998: 283-284; 1.III.b.9; 1.III.b.10). This exercise began in 1990 and had to be performed

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99 However, if the LRU pays little attention to the issue of quality assurance, the same can not be said of the 1990 LOGSE. This Act, which encompasses the entire Spanish educational system explicitly underlines that: "Public authorities will pay particular attention to the different factors that promote quality and improvement of teaching, in particular to a) qualification and training of professorial staff, b) curriculum, c) educational means and management functions, d) innovation and educational research, e) educational and professional orientation, f) educational inspection and g) evaluation of the educational system" (BoE 1990: § 55, in Rodríguez 1991: 42 footnote 1).

100 This point is worth some elaboration. It has generally been remarked that the rate of dropout in Spanish HE was traditionally very high. High dropout rates are generally one major factor presented to implement some kind of quality assurance measures. The present author has not been able to find consistent evidence of this fact in the Spanish case. Neither during the interviews nor in the review of the literature did the question of drop out appear as a reason for putting quality high on the agenda, especially the agenda of the CU. In addition, it has not been possible to identify reliable and consistent sources of information regarding the dropout rates in Spanish HE. After consultation with the person in charge of documentary services of the CU, it appeared that there are no national data on the topic that could be used for the period analysed in the present research. However, more recent statistics show that about 50% of the students do not go beyond their third year of study and about 1/4th fail in the final fourth year (CU 2000b).

within the framework provided by the 1983 LRU. Procedures related to the assessment of teaching remained with the institutions whereas the evaluation of research activities was taken over by the MEC. In both cases, the outcomes, if positive, would result in a rise in salary (Garcia *et al.* 1995: 114-115).

As far as teaching is concerned, the process lacked strict and clear guidelines and parameters. As a result, the evaluations were all positive, which meant that the process became a means to reward seniority (CU 1994b: 60-61; Mora 1997a: 197; 1.III.b.8). Things went differently for research activities. The Ministry had established a National Committee composed of experts in a variety of scientific domains. This Committee was responsible for the evaluation of individual staff's research performance and produced some negative assessments. However, the methods used for assessing the results were not appropriate for all the domains assessed, which was cause of disagreement within academia (Mora and Villareal 1996: 178).

An understanding of the situation can also be found by looking at the theoretical literature published at the time of these experiences in Spain. Without entering into all the details, it is possible to argue that the instruments used at the time were based on the belief that quality was a matter for individuals, hence, the focus on the figure of the individual professor as the prime measure of quality. Critics claimed that the quality of HE could not be assessed by looking into individuals' performance only. Rather, it needed to take into account the whole environment within which these individuals perform their tasks. By so doing, it was possible to justify a shift in the beliefs regarding the focus of quality: from quality of teaching, based on individuals' performance, towards the more comprehensive notion of quality of education. In the Spanish context, de Miguel (1991) was among the first writers to emphasise the need for a global approach to quality in HE based on teaching, research and overall services.

The assessments of individuals' teaching and research activities constituted the early moves towards the construction of systematised policy for quality assurance. To a large extent, the discussions held at the time focused on quantitative PIs (Cave *et al* 1988; Dochy *et al. Eds* 1990) and how to apply them to the Spanish context. A good example of this can be found in the proceedings of the XV Joint University-Industry workshop organised in Segovia in October 1989 (MEC 1989). The title of the workshop, *Towards a ranking of universities*

based on quality criteria, gives a clear indication of the orientations that were discussed at that time.

This road, however, was not going to be followed much further, especially as regards the focus of the instruments for quality assurance. What happened after the Segovia workshop is difficult to fully understand, let alone explain. The shift in the core beliefs of quality assurance policy from an individual-based system of quality assurance largely relying on quantitative elements to more qualitative and formative-oriented instruments, seems, however, to owe much to the combined role of the CU and particular individual actors emerging as key figures in the domain of quality assurance policy and, more generally, HE policy.

This is not an easy element to take into consideration. It implies a consideration of the issue of the role played by individuals in the road taken by a particular policy. In the context of the changing views on quality assurance policy in the Spanish context, and in the light of other data, it seems however illustrative to quote from one of the interviewees:

> "In 1988, the Council [of Universities] organised the first national competition for studies in higher education. (...) I had just completed my PhD and won a scholarship to go to Stanford in November 1989. I submitted my proposal and won the competition. When I went to the Council to get the award, I was asked whether I wanted to prepare for them a report on rankings in US universities. My thesis was on the economics of education, I had no clue on the issue of rankings but I accepted anyway. (...) Once in Stanford, I realised that no serious institutions were doing university rankings, they were done by the newspapers. I started getting information and learnt that what was done, on the contrary, is something called "quality assessment". (...) I ended up writing a report criticising the use of rankings and advocating the development of quality evaluation ... something that was already being done in Europe.
>
> 1.III.b.9

Garreta-Torner (1998: 284) recalls that in the late 1980 and early 1990s, the CU organised a number of debates on the issue of institutional evaluation and sponsored publications on the topic (Mora 1991; de Miguel *et al.* 1991). This was brought forward with the appointment, in 1991, of Miguel Angel Quintanilla as General Secretary of the CU who, according to several sources, was much in favour of promoting initiatives in the domain of quality assurance especially as regards methodological issues (Rodríguez 1998: 142; 1.III.a.3, 1.III.b.13). Within this general context, the CU organised another seminar in Almagro in November 1991 to discuss the question of institutional evaluation in HE (1.III.b.11; CU 1994a: 131-145). The

conclusions of this seminar were going to trace the line for future developments. The participants agreed on the following points:

> - "the need to develop an institutional evaluation of the universities;
> - that the fundamental objective of the process of evaluation had to be the improvement of the quality of the institution;
> - the evaluation has to take into account the activities of teaching, research and services, considering the interrelations among them;
> - the evaluation has to have, initially, only formative consequences;
> - a working group has to be formed composed by the Universities of Barcelona, Castellón, Castilla-La Mancha, Córdoba, Granada, Madrid Complutense, Madrid Politécnica, Murcia, Salamanca and Sevilla to elaborate further on this issue [of institutional evaluation]."[101]
>
> CU 1994a: 133

This working group met again in February 1992 to discuss the lines along which the issue of evaluation was to be developed. Three areas were then identified as foci for any form of evaluation: teaching, research and general services. It offered a general overview of practical and methodological aspects that would be of major relevance in the coming years.

Eventually, the combination of these elements would lead the CU to agree, in September 1992, on the launch of the first wide-scale assessment programme (CU 1994b: 59). The objective of this Experimental Programme of Quality Evaluation in Universities (*Plan Experimental de Evaluación de la Calidad de las Universidades*), was to devise a methodological framework from which further experiences could benefit (1.III.b.13; CU 1994b: esp. 59-68). This methodological framework, the CU stated (CU 1995a: 16-18), had to be based on international experiences that had been reported in different studies, i.e. those sponsored by the CU in 1991.

The Experimental Programme ran from January 1993 to September 1994. It permitted the development of a wide-ranging approach to the quality of teaching, research and management of the universities involved and principally helped to test methodological issues and formulate

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[101] Personal translation. The original quote runs as follows:
- "Ha existido unanimidad en la necesidad de realizar una evaluación institucional universitaria;
- El objetivo fundamental del proceso de evaluación debe ser la mejora de la calidad institucional;
- La evaluación debe tener en cuenta los ámbitos de docencia, investigación y los servicios, considerando las interrelaciones existentes entre ellos;
- La evaluación debe tener consecuencias, en un primer momento, de carácter exclusivamente formativo;
- Se forma un grupo de trabajo compuesto por las Universidades de Barcelona, Castellón, Castilla-La Mancha, Córdoba, Granada, Madrid Complutense, Madrid Politécnica, Murcia, Salamanca y Sevilla para seguir profundizando sobre este tema." (CU 1994a: 133)

proposals for further developments. According to Mora, this first large-scale exercise was a success. It helped to convince:

> "university leaders, the academic community and the governments that such a process could be carried out smoothly and with positive results for the universities. This is probably the best result of the process: *the culture of evaluation* [had] been expanded in Spanish Universities."
> Mora 1997b: 62, emphasis in the original

The results of this pilot programme were discussed at an international seminar in September 1994. It was then agreed that despite the difficulties encountered, the overall process was positive and had to be continued (Garreta-Torner 1998: 286). However, when it came to prepare the future of quality assurance in Spain, through the launch of a nation-wide process, the CU was confronted with a lack of financial support. The culture of quality that Mora referred to was maybe not as widespread as one would have expected.

But Europe came to the rescue. In 1994, the European Commission launched the *Pilot Project for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education* (Thune 1997; CU 1995b) that ran from 1994 to 1995. In contrast to the Spanish Experimental Programme, the Pilot Project concentrated only on the assessment of teaching, leaving aside the research and services dimensions. Four Spanish universities took part in this second experiment, two of which had already been involved in the Experimental Programme. Taking part in the European project was a second important learning experience for Spain. This early contact with international models was carried further by several universities, which decided to take part in the Institutional Evaluation Programme run by the CRE[102] (EC 1995: 15-19). Participating in international programmes allowed not only for a clarification of the methodology but also for the setting up of the on-site visits, two elements that were to be crucial in the development of the PNECU. In this perspective, it is possible to argue that the quality assurance policy domain in Spain originated from a combination of national and international experiences.

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[102] Since 1993, the CRE has been running institutional evaluations programmes in European universities. The first experiences were organised between 1993 and 1995 and included the Universities of Göteborg, Utrecht and Oporto (EC 1995: 16). Since then, more than fifty universities of twenty countries have participated. Of these institutions, nine are form one of the countries analysed in the present study: 6 from Spain (Autonomous University of Barcelona, University of Granada, University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, University of Lleida and University of Vigo) 2 from the Netherlands (University of Utrecht and University of Twente) and 1 from England (University of North London).

These experiences certainly helped to develop some kind of "evaluation culture" among Spanish universities. The objective was not only to have an insight into how universities were performing in their teaching activities and their own management but also to anchor the process of quality assurance within a broader European context. The methods as well as the general organisation that had been used during the two previous experiences were used to refine the methodology within the particular Spanish context and, equally important, to train a certain number of staff. For more than four years, then, quality assurance had been tested in several universities with a relatively high rate of success. The door was open for a nation-wide programme.

The PNECU was adopted by the Parliament in 1995. It began to operate a year later, once the first call for proposals was launched and the projects were approved. Among the most striking characteristics of the PNECU is the fact that it is totally voluntary (BoE 1995: § 2). Two ongoing and convergent factors can help understand this situation. The first is the extended autonomy universities were granted by the LRU. In this sense, imposing any type of territorial-wide procedures, often against the institutions themselves, was simply not feasible. The territorial dimension is the second point that helps to understand the voluntary nature of the PNECU.

In effect, the devolution of competencies in the domain of HE policy from central to regional governments has been one of the major political trends in recent years. The moment of the devolution has differed from region to region, mainly because of their financial capabilities of meeting all the consequences of the process. Despite the differences, nowadays, all the 17 CCAAs are responsible for their universities and for the formulation, within the framework of the LRU, of their own policies and development plans.

Together with the voluntary dimension of the procedures, the autonomy of the institutions is also emphasised in the calls for proposal also unique in the European context. Practically, this situation leads the institutions to select the type of assessment they wish to be subject to. The PNECU actually defines a set of very broad rules and the institutions can choose not only whether or not to enter the process and, if they decide to do so, to propose the topic they wish to see evaluated. In this sense, both the voluntarily basis of the PNECU and the structure of

the process itself certainly makes Spanish structure of quality assessment procedures one of the most bottom-heavy systems.

Another important element to be underlined is the period of crisis that the PNECU experienced in its early days. This element has been pointed out by the Spanish informants (1.III.a.2; 1.III.b.30; 1.III.c.2) and recalls the influence the political level can have over the orientations of the CU and its activities. As noted earlier (section 7.4.2), the ruling government, in particular the Minister of Education, can have a decisive impact on the policy orientations of the CU via its chairmanship and the appointment of the General Secretary and other senior positions. The 1996 general elections brought the right-wing Popular Party to power. This had a tremendous impact on the CU, which led to the resignation of the then General Secretary, Miguel Angel Michavila (*El Mundo* 18.03.1997). A period of instability and, indeed, crisis began in most of the university sector (for instance: *El Mundo* 12.07.1997; 18.10.1997; 18.12.1997). As regards quality assurance policy, informants recalled that the situation was difficult (1.III.b31; 1.III.a.5). This can be seen in the fact that the number of calls for proposals previously agreed for the PNECU were reduced from 5 to 4. During more than one year, since the appointment of the new Minister of Education in 1996, until early 1998, the programme was almost at a stop (1.III.a.6), only supported by those who started it in the CU (1.III.b.29).

A reshuffle of the Cabinet, however, brought in a new Minister of Education and, with him, the appointment of a new General Secretary of the CU. According to different sources, these changes allowed the PNECU to continue (1.III.a.2; 1.III.b.30). The latter attracted an increasing number of projects and institutions over the three calls for proposals launched until 2000, thus completing its cycle successfully. Now a period of reflection has followed as to the orientations that future policies for quality assurance should adopt in the (near) future. Here, it seems more than probable that the question of linking the results to consequences of some kind will emerge with particular vigour as will that of the impact of total decentralisation and, maybe to an even greater extent, of European integration.

7.7. Summary and Provisional Conclusions

This chapter has addressed the domain of quality assurance in the Spanish system of HE. As shown, the latter's recent history has been characterised by profound transformations that, to a very large extent, stemmed from the democratisation of Spanish society and the effect this had on the structure of the state itself. Hence, the importance of the recognition, by the 1978 Constitution, of the seventeen CCAAs as political entities and the subsequent process of devolution of prerogatives in many policy domains. As regards HE, the Constitution also stated the principle of institutional autonomy, which the 1983 LRU was to translate into practice.

Within this general context, the 1983 LRU can arguably be seen as one of the factors that have most influenced the construction of quality assurance as a policy domain in the Spanish context. As noted, the Act determined, among other elements, the organisation of the entire system of HE, fixed the nature and extent of the competencies of the different responsible entities – i.e. central state, the CCAAs and the universities - and made provision for the setting up of the CU. As regards quality assurance policy, the LRU encompasses the three elements that have played a crucial role both in the emergence of quality assurance and, indirectly, in the shape it has taken. First, the LRU arranged for the development of early assessments of the teaching and research activities of tenured members of staff. Second, the Act established the CU that, as shown above, developed parallel experiences in quality assurance in the late 1980s and early 1990s, based not on the performance of individuals but on institutional evaluations. Third, the LRU also provided the practical and ideational framework within which all the experiences had to be undertaken, i.e. institutional autonomy and the prerogatives of the sub-national political level.

Concurrently to the LRU, a second major factor that influenced the structure adopted by quality assurance in Spain is the political organisation of the state. This point has been referred to above but deserves some further discussion. The decentralisation of the Spanish State is a factor affecting the shape of quality assurance policy inasmuch as it transfers prerogatives over HE in general from the central state to regional governments. As a result, the latter become responsible for the formulation, development and implementation of HE policy and, within this context, for quality assurance. How actual policies have transformed the legal possibility into action varies considerably from region to region. Variation has

occurred not only in the timing of the transfer of responsibilities but also in the areas of HE policy where regional governments have worked out their own orientations. In the domain of quality assurance, only Catalunya disposes of systematised procedures of quality assurance organised by an Agency and Andalucia has followed a similar road. So far, the regional agencies and the CU have worked in collaboration as regards the PNECU. But changes may well occur in the future when the question of the use of the information, indeed, the actual pertinence of the PNECU is discussed. It is in this context that the de-centralised structure of the state could affect quality assurance policy. For instance, if some kind of link has to be introduced between the results of the quality assurance procedures and funding, the consent of regional governments would be indispensable because it is they who pay for their HE.

Finally, the international context has emerged as a third important factor in the shape taken by the quality assurance policy domain in Spain. The chapter has shown how the CU emphasised, in the early 1990s, the development of quality assurance instruments that would be based on international experiences, as those reported in the publications it sponsored. Later, Spain would learn further from international practice in quality assurance by taking part in the Pilot Project. It seems therefore justified to argue that the PNECU, as the dominant policy for quality assurance in Spanish HE, was the result of both internal and external factors. The latter continued to be influential even after the PNECU had been launched, as attested by the participation of five Spanish universities in the institutional evaluation operated by the CRE.

In the report he co-ordinated on the future of the Spanish university system, Josep Bricall pointed out that the struggle for quality was to become the principal challenge for Spanish HE, once the quantitative roof had been reached (Bricall *et al.* 2000: 361). After what has been presented in this chapter, such a statement appears more to be a call for a reflection than a true complaint. In effect, with the conclusion of the last series of projects in 2001, the PNECU has reached the end of its first life. For five years it formed the dominant policy for quality assurance in Spain, although some parallel experiences were undertaken in some regions. The issue seems not to be the need to develop quality assurance procedures but how to improve, within the institutional limitations and international changes, what has been achieved over the last decade. Which is precisely the objective of the Second National Evaluation Plan officially launched in April 2001 (BoE 2001).

Chapter 8 Switzerland

8.1. Introduction

Changing times. So could be summarised the recent history of Swiss HE. Changes in the structure of the system itself and the legislative framework(s), first. Changes in the relationships between the political authorities and the HE institutions, too. But more importantly, changes in the sharing of responsibilities between the national and sub-national political levels. These responsibilities are set by the Constitution. It allows the Confederation[103] (central government) to create HE institutions and to take part in their funding. This latter prerogative was not easy to implement. After three unsuccessful attempts, it was eventually achieved in 1968 through the passing of the federal Act on Financial Assistance to Universities (*Loi sur l'Aide aux Universités* - LAU) (Cottier 1985: 49). The passing of this Act marked the beginning of the debates on the governance of Swiss HE policy in the light of the financial participation of the different political levels involved and the challenges ahead. A progressive shift began to take place from a situation based on a strong cantonal autonomy and a subsidiary role of the Confederation, towards a more active involvement of the latter.

As noted elsewhere (Perellon 1998), the turn of the 1980s was a key moment in the transformation of HE policy in Switzerland[104]. Official reports emphasised the need to modify the then existing institutional structures and the governance of the whole system if future challenges were to be met successfully (CSS 1989, 1993). As a consequence, cantonal and federal authorities, together with the HE institutions embarked on a process of profound transformation, which would eventually lead to the revision of the entire legislative

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[103] The adoption of the 1848 Constitution transformed Switzerland from a simple loose confederation of cantons, where all decisions taken by cantonal representatives had to be ratified by their respective governments, into a formal federation. By so doing, the cantons agreed to abandon some prerogatives in favour of a central government. Since then, the logic of policy-making and implementation has encompassed a larger or smaller degree of co-operation between the two political levels, depending on the policy domain. Despite the juridical inaccuracy, this chapter will use the term *Confederation* when referring to the central Federal Government, rather than *Federation*, as in all official publications.

[104] This period was characterised by a combination of political and social factors that, once combined, acted as a "political window" for change. As regards the political factors, the most important was the refusal to join the European Economic Area in December 1992. This caused a severe blow to the scientific community that feared to being isolated from the research programmes run in Europe. This was further dramatised by the budget-cuts in all public domains, among which HE, and the claims for universities to intensify their links with society.

framework on HE in late 1999 and to the creation of an organ for accreditation and quality assurance (*Organe d'Accréditation et Assurance Qualité* – OAAQ)[105].

Against this background, the following pages analyse how quality assurance in HE has passed from being an exclusive cantonal and institutional matter to becoming an issue of intense debate in the political arena at the national level. To that end, section 8.2 outlines the features most influencing the policy-making process. Then, sections 8.3 and 8.4 discuss the structure of Swiss HE as regards the system and the collective actors alternatively. From section 8.5 onwards, the focus turns to the issue of quality assurance. First, the current structure of the policy domain is sketched, thus permitting the identification of the responses to the fundamental choices. The synchronic approach is then complemented by a diachronic enquiry. This is done in section 8.6 where the current policy for quality assurance is re-constructed by looking at the influence of the different factors identified earlier. Finally, the main findings of the chapters are summarised in section 8.7.

8.2. Political and Societal Features in Switzerland

This section discusses the most salient socio-political features in Switzerland in order to provide a better understanding of the context within which policy is produced[106].

8.2.1. Consensus Democracy

Switzerland is a semi-direct democracy with a set of unique political institutions that most affect policy-making: the referendums and the popular initiatives[107]. These institutions offer the possibility for interested groups to become involved in the political game by challenging

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[105] The name of the body responsible for quality assurance in Switzerland cannot be straightforwardly translated into the English word "agency". This term was rejected during the debate (see below). As a result, the body was given the name of *Organ* (in French).

[106] The Swiss federal system has been analysed through different perspectives. Some authors have seen in Switzerland the grounds for a consociational political system (Lijphart 1984). Others have emphasised the importance of corporatist arrangements (Schmitter and Lehmbruch *Eds* 1979, Katzenstein 1989) while still others have pointed out the federal structure of the state and the political institutional arrangements stemming from it (Nüssli 1985, Klöti 1988, Bogdanor 1988). The present chapter borrows principally from the literature of the latter approach.

[107] Referendums can be compulsory or facultative. In the first case, they allow Swiss citizens to vote on any constitutional change. The majority of the voters and of the cantons is required for amendments to be adopted. Facultative referendums offer the possibility of opposing a decision adopted in Parliament regarding a new Act or any international treaty. Both need to be backed either by 50,000 valid signatures or

parliamentary decisions and launching legislative proposals. To a large extent, they form the background against which the politics of consensus are constructed (Kriesi 1998: 90-139; Papadopoulos 1997). Consensus is a key feature of the Swiss political system, although it should not hide the disagreements that do exist when it comes to decision-making. Rather, as Bonoli underlines (2000: 87), consensus mechanisms are an historical production aimed at limiting the impact of disagreement on the policy-making process in a culturally segmented society. The "politics of consensus" are mirrored in the organisation of the executive and legislative powers.

The executive federal government is composed of seven Ministers representing the four most important parties in the country[108]. Each Minister heads a Federal Department that is divided into several offices and agencies. In order to support overloaded Ministers, a number of Secretaries of State have been appointed over the years. The number of these top civil servants is limited and not every Department has one. Their role, however, is crucial in the orientation to be given to new draft legislation. The concentration of power within the government has increased the importance of the federal administration and its different offices and agencies (Germann 1996: 37ss; Kriesi 1998: 224). The adoption of framework acts rather than more detailed ones further reinforces the position of the administration as regards the formulation of workable policies.

Switzerland does not have a central Department of Education. Rather, after recent changes in the federal administration, all issues regarding higher academic and vocational education as well as research are concentrated in two Departments: the Department for Public Economy

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eight cantons. *Popular initiatives* also allow for constitutional change but are initiated by Swiss citizens and have to be backed by 100,000 valid signatures. The double majority is also needed for their adoption.

108 These are: the Socialist Party, the Radical Party (centre-right), the Liberal Party (right) and the Centre Democratic Union (right). Since 1959, a "Magic Formula" is used to determine the number of representatives of these parties: 2 from Socialist Party, 2 from the Radical Party, 2 from the Liberal Party and 1 from the Centre Democratic Union.
Members of the Federal Council are elected individually in a joint session of both Houses of Parliament. Their mandate is for a four-year period during which they are not accountable to the Parliament. This emphasises political stability as does the fact that, traditionally, the members of the Federal Council are always re-elected if they wish to remain in power (Kriesi 1998: 220). The principle of collegiality rules the relations among the members of the government. Each is bound by the decisions taken by the majority even if s/he does not support it personally. The wide room for manoeuvre enjoyed by the executive is however limited by a number of factors. Among these, two are of significant importance (Kriesi 1998: 222-224). The first are the institutions of direct democracy that force the executive, as the Parliament, to look for a consensual decision. The second factor limiting the power of the government is the workload resulting from the concentration of power.

and the Department of Internal Affairs. Issues related to HE itself are generally dealt with in the latter Department. Within it, responsibility mainly rests with the Science Agency (*Groupement pour la Science et la Recherche* – GSR – see below) headed by the Secretary of State for Science and Research. As part of the GSR, the Federal Office for Education and Science is of crucial importance. As further discussed below, it is here that bills and other legislation are prepared. The analysis of the revision of the LAU Act will provide an illuminating example of the importance of this office.

As regards legislative power, the Swiss Parliament consists of two Houses. The Upper House (*Conseil des Etats*) is composed of 46 members representing the 26 cantons, whereas the Lower House (*Conseil National*) represents the Swiss citizens and is composed of 200 members. The two Houses have the same rights, obligations and functions. The adoption of a bill requires the support of both Houses. Each House disposes of an identical number of Commissions where bills are discussed prior to their presentation in Parliament. Issues related to HE are dealt with in the Commissions for Science, Education and Culture (*Commission de la Science, de l'Education et de la Culture* - CSCE). These Commissions play a crucial role in shaping parliamentary debates and decisions. A study by Lüthi (1996) has shown that decisions adopted in the Commissions are nearly always accepted in the respective Houses. In 1997, the success rate reached 96.1% in the Upper House and 93.9% in the Lower House (Kriesi 1998: 185).

The process of policy-making goes through different stages reflecting the importance given to getting a consensual decision. The first is the impulsion stage where proposals are made for new Acts or the revision of existing ones. When the federal government initiates new legislation, as was the case with the revision of the LAU, the preparatory work is undertaken by the federal administration. The second stage is the pre-parliamentary phase during which a consultation on the bill is launched. Here the objective is to widen and strengthen the support for the proposal. Once the consultation is completed, the relevant office finalises the bill before sending it to Parliament. Here begins the third stage of the decision-making process: the parliamentary phase. At first the bill is discussed in the competent Commission of one House which drafts a report with its decisions and potential amendments. In the case of disagreement, the report of the majority of the Commission can be accompanied by one of the minority. The bill is then discussed during a parliamentary session and voted on. An

identical process takes then place in the other House. If the latter does not agree with the decision, the bill navigates from one House to the other until an agreement is found. When this is the case, the bill is published and the process enters the fourth stage: the referendum stage. As noted, opponents can still prevent, or at least delay, the implementation of the Act by launching a referendum. If no opposition arises within ninety days, the Act enters into force.

8.2.2. The Politics of Consensus and the Organisation of the Policy Domains

In *Swiss Democracy*, Linder (1994) noted that Switzerland could neither be described as a centralised or a decentralised country when it comes to producing legislation and to implementing it (1994: 40-41). Rather, one finds a mix of federal, cantonal and communal responsibilities that vary from one policy domain to another. Some domains, such as external relations or postal services, fall under the responsibility of the federal government as regards the preparation of legislation and its implementation. Other areas, by contrast, rest exclusively with the cantons, for instance police, church or primary education. Still others are a shared responsibility of the cantons and the Confederation. This is the case for HE. As noted, the Constitution fixes the roles and obligations of the Confederation in this domain. While recognising that responsibility for university policy remains with the cantons, it allows the Confederation to take part in the funding of cantonal universities and to set up its own institutions of HE.

Arrangements in the domain of HE are a good example of co-operative federalism. Because the federal government does not dispose of a sufficient administrative body, it is dependent on the cantons for the implementation of the adopted legislation. Institutional arrangements have, consequently, been established to regulate the relationships between the Confederation and the cantons and among the cantons themselves. Two of them are important for the purpose of this study: the Concordat and the Convention.

Concordats are inter-cantonal arrangements aiming at providing closer co-operation and greater co-ordination. Later in this chapter, the importance of the Concordat will be elaborated further in relation to quality assurance policy. Conventions are agreements governing the relations between the Confederation and the cantons. They set down the principles of the co-operation and the responsibilities each side is ready to abandon.

Having discussed the principal features of the Swiss political system, the focus turns to the HE system. The principal characteristics of the system are addressed with particular emphasis on its academic component[109].

8.3. The Swiss System of Higher Education

Responsibility over the HE policy domain in Switzerland is shared between the Confederation and the cantons. Co-ordination is achieved in the different bodies that have been set up over the years, as well as through the LAU, the most important piece of legislation in Swiss HE (LAU 1991, 1999). In 1999, the Swiss HE system accommodated some 98,000 students, including the higher professional sector (OFS 1998a, 1998b). Between 1996 and 2003, this figure is expected to increase almost by 20%[110] (CUS 1998a: 243). The following paragraphs present the principal characteristics of the HE system.

8.3.1. The University Sector

Responsibility for university education rests with the cantons. These formulate their own legislation, which has traditionally granted limited autonomy to the institutions. This situation has changed in recent years with the revision of most university Acts. Under the new regulations, universities have increased their room for manoeuvre, especially as regards the use of the funding. However, the degree of institutional autonomy varies from one canton to another. All (but one) have revised their legislative frameworks, but they have done so in quite different ways (Perellon and Leresche 1999).

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[109] Most official publications (Vision 1997, 1999a; Kleiber 1998, 1999) present the universities and the federal institutes of technology as part of the same academic/scientific component of the Swiss HE. This is based on the assumption that both aim to providing, as their main priority, an academic education and the undertaking of fundamental research. As a result, the recent establishment of the Universities of Applied Sciences, with strong emphasis on vocational-oriented education and applied research and development, is seen as the creation of a second sector of tertiary-level education, an alternative to the traditional road. This opposition, which stems from an academic division of educational work, leaves the political dimension completely unaddressed. In effect, task sharing between federal and cantonal authorities shapes the way HE policy is formulated and implemented in Switzerland and already forms a binary structure. In this sense the creation of the higher vocational education sector, and its particular inter-cantonal organisation, actually reflects the emergence of a third component in the Swiss HE system as well as the formulation of a number of particular polices especially related to it. Due to its recent creation and the peculiarities of its organisational features, the sector of higher vocational education will not be discussed further in this study (see Herbst *et al.* Eds 1997; *Le Temps* 19.04. 1999; Weber 1998).

[110] More precisely, the number of new entrants is expected to increase by 29%, that of the students enrolled in the first and second university cycle by 26% and the post-graduate students, including doctoral students, by 4%.

There are ten cantonal universities[111] offering degree and post-degree courses in a range of disciplines. They are funded by four different sources: the cantons; the Confederation; *via* an inter-cantonal agreement and from other sources including student fees. The proportion of each source differs according to the wealth of the cantons, poor ones getting more federal subsidies than rich ones. The inter-cantonal agreement means that each canton finances part of its students' university education. As regards internal governance patterns, Swiss universities have historically followed similar patterns. On the one hand, the executive power is represented by the Rector and his/her team generally elected by the professorial staff. On the other, the Senate represents the legislative counterpart. Again, this has to be understood as a general picture inasmuch as each university Act determines the modes of election of the Rectorate and the composition of the Senate.

8.3.2. The EPF Domain

The second road to HE in Switzerland is composed of two Federal Institutes of Technology (*Ecoles Polytechniques Fédérales* - EPFs) and four other attached research Institutes[112]. They are owned, run and funded by the central government and form what is commonly referred to as the *EPF Domain*. The Board of the EPFs is responsible for the division of tasks between the institutions and defines the strategic orientations. Being run and owned by the Confederation, the EPFs and their Board are supervised by the Federal Department of Internal Affairs. The relationships between the two EPFs and their mentors have undergone substantial transformations. These led to the revision, in 1991, of the federal Act ruling the EPFs in the sense of a broader institutional autonomy. Among the six institutions mentioned, the two EPFs are the most important. For that reason this study will take only them into consideration.

Having outlined the structure of the Swiss HE system, the chapter continues with a

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111 There are six fully fledged in Basel, Berne, Fribourg, Geneva, Lausanne, Neuchâtel and Zurich and 3 smaller university-level institutions in St Gallen, Luzern and Ticino. Basel has the oldest university in the country (1460), whereas the other academies set up during the Reformation by the Church were transformed into universities in the 19th century. This was the case of Zurich (1523-1833), Bern (1528-1834), Geneva (1595-1873) and Lausanne (1595-1890). Other universities include Lucerne University College (1600), Neuchâtel (1838-1909), Fribourg (1899) and St Gallen (1911-1962) (Ruegg 1982: 395). In 1996, another university was established in the Italian speaking part of the country.

112 These are the Paul Scherrer Institute, the Federal Institute for Research into Forestry, Snow and Landscape, the Federal Laboratory for Material Testing, and the Centre for the Management, Cleaning and Protection of Waters.

discussion of the most influential actors involved in HE policy-making and their role in the domain of quality assurance.

8.4. Actors Involved in Swiss Higher Education Policy

Being a shared prerogative of the Confederation and cantons, the HE policy domain brings together a large number of actors. This section presents the most important of them.

8.4.1. The Science Agency (*Groupement pour la Science et la Recherche* - GSR)

This GSR was established by the Confederation in 1990 with the task of providing greater co-ordination as regards HE and research policy as a whole. It is the most important administrative body dealing with HE policy and is located within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Since 1992, the Agency's director is also Secretary of State for Science and Research. This was crucial in the visibility taken by the GSR, especially in the implementation of the federal guidelines on HE policy. The political origins of the GSR make it the home of two other important bodies: the Board of the EPFs (see above) and the Federal Office for Education and Science.

8.4.2. The Federal Office for Education and Science (*Office Fédéral de l'Education et de la Science* - OFES)

Set up in 1968, the OFES is responsible for producing legislation on education, science and research. As regards HE policy, it is involved in three areas. First, it allocates the federal subsidies to the cantonal universities. Second, it prepares the decision regarding the financial participation of the federal authorities as well as the different legislative documents. Finally, it co-ordinates the activities between the cantons and the Confederation or in the European programmes involving Switzerland. As further discussed below, the OFES played an important part in the formulation of quality assurance policy in Switzerland, although its role as regards the implementation is not substantial.

As top administrative bodies in the domain of HE policy, both the GSR and the OFES have played a crucial role during the revision of the LAU and, within this context, in putting quality assurance high on the agenda.

8.4.3. The Swiss University Conference (*Conférence Universitaire Suisse* - CUS)

The CUS is a joint body of the cantons and the Confederation. It was established in 1968 as a co-ordinating body and discussion forum for HE policy. Its structure has changed substantially as a result of the passing of the new LAU and related legislation[113]. Its composition has been reduced to 12 members (previously 29) and its decision-making powers extended to domains such as the determination of the length of study programmes and the revalorisation of scientific knowledge (Federal Administration 1999c). In its new format, the CUS has only been in operation since January 2001, once the cantonal Concordat and the Convention of Co-operation had been signed. These documents also made official the establishment, within the CUS, of the OAAQ. As part of its activities, the CUS has carried out several analyses of the state-of-the-art on quality assurance in Swiss HE (CUS 1994: 158-162; 1997; 1998a Chap. 6.10, 1998b, 1999; 2.II.b.9). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the CUS played a role in putting quality assurance on the agenda by proposing some general orientations.

8.4.4. The Swiss Science (and Technology) Council (*Conseil Suisse de la Science et de la Technologie* - CSST)

Under its new label, the CSS(T) has been in operation since January 2000. Before that date, the word *technology* was absent. Like the new CUS, the CSST is a product of the recent restructuring of Swiss HE. The CSS was created in 1965, but its tasks were clarified only with the passing of the 1968 LAU. It was set up as an advisory body to the Confederation. Consequently, it was responsible for the collection and analysis of data on HE that would help develop a national policy for HE (CSS 1967, 1972, 1978). Its role was mainly a strategic and prospective one. The general transformations of the 1990s, especially the creation of the GSR, have somewhat reduced its influence over HE in general, although its advisory role remains. This task is carried out especially through the production of reports on international trends and issues, among which is quality assurance (Nievergelt and Izzo 2001).

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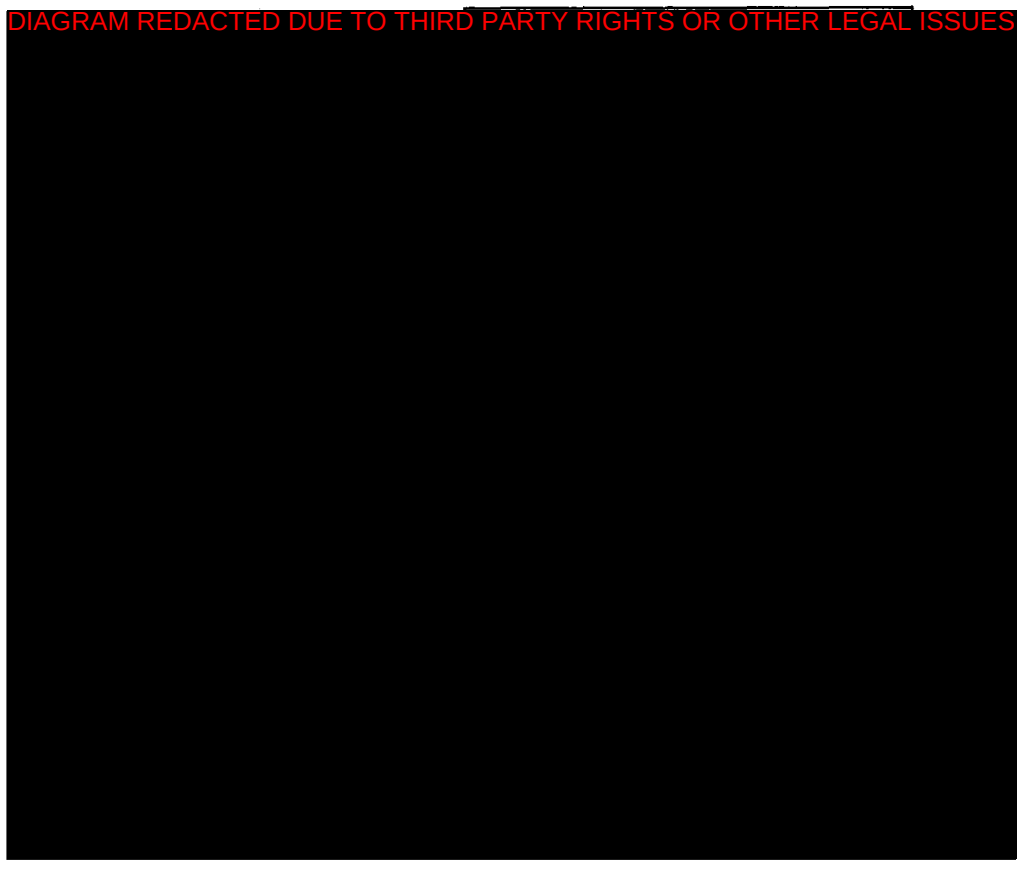
[113] Originally, the CUS was seen as a meeting point for all actors involved in university policy-making. It was composed of 29 representatives of the university cantons, the non-university cantons, the students, the National Research Foundation and three representatives of the federal administration.

8.4.5. The Conference of Swiss Universities' Rectors (*Conférence des Recteurs des Universités Suisses* - CRUS)

Established in 1904, the CRUS has predominantly been concerned with the harmonisation of administrative duties among HE institutions. Within the new legislative framework the CRUS elaborates proposals for the CUS and implements the policies adopted by the latter. As regards quality assurance, the CRUS acts as an intermediary between the institutions and the co-ordinating bodies.

This section has presented the principal institutional actors at play in Swiss HE policy and their role in the domain of quality assurance policy. Figure 8.1 outlines their relationships.

FIGURE 8.1. RELATIONSHIPS AMONG ACTORS IN THE DOMAIN OF QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY IN SWISS HIGHER EDUCATION (2001)



Source: personal elaboration from Vision 2/2000

In the following pages these actors are combined with the other elements discussed so far to re-construct the "history" of quality assurance policy in this country. To start with, the focus is on the structure of the policy domain as of December 2000.

8.5. Quality Assurance Policy in Swiss Higher Education: The Synchronic View

Providing a clear and straightforward picture of the quality assurance policy domain in Swiss HE is not an easy task. Until recently this domain was a responsibility either of the cantons, in the case of the universities, or the Confederation, for the EPF Domain. This means that diversity and lack of systematisation would best characterise the general situation. Diversity can be highlighted by the fact that there are ten different cantonal university Acts and one federal Act on the EPFs, thus providing eleven different approaches to quality assurance in HE. However, these traditional arrangements are being challenged by recent decisions to coordinate the domain of quality assurance by the creation of an Organ for Accreditation and Quality Assurance. Consequently, the current structure of the policy domain, in terms of responses to the fundamental policy choices, highlights the following transitional arrangements.

Objectives: formative

Clear and consistent statements regarding the objectives of quality assurance policy in HE are difficult to identify. As regards teaching, universities stress the formative value of the procedures they use (CUS 1999). Although differences can be found from one institution to another, most aim to improve the pedagogy of teaching through feedback from the students. In some cases, the objectives acquire a more strategic dimension, especially when the procedures coincide with a re-organisation of the institutions. Here, quality assurance policies can also impact on the planing strategies (as in St Gall - CUS 1998a: 169). Similar orientations can be observed in the EPFs. Here too, the prime objective of quality assurance policy is considered to be formative. In some cases, this formative objective combines with a more strategic one, like the adaptation of curricula to social demand.

As regards the OAAQ, no specific objectives had been determined when this study was being written. There is, however, little doubt that the formative purposes will remain a key orientation.

Control: joint responsibilities

As regards the control of the policy domain, the Swiss situation also shows some ambiguity. On the one hand, the basic principle is that responsibility for quality assurance rests with the individual institutions. This principle is, on the other hand, counterbalanced by the fact that

the cantons and the Confederation have to ensure that procedures are adopted and implemented to maintain standards. This is the main *raison d'être* of the OAAQ. The actual shape and structure of this body are the result of negotiations that are discussed in detail later. It is important to note that the Organ is located within the CUS. Although presented as independent, all its activities will be carried out on behalf of the CUS (Convention de Coopération 2000 § 18.1). In this perspective, the OAAQ seems to play an advisory role with few decision-making prerogatives. This and the nomination procedures of the Organ's board, raise doubts as to its actual independence. When fully operational, the OAAQ will have four main responsibilities: a) defining the requirements to be met by the institutions in the domain of quality assurance; b) ensuring that these requirements are being met; c) formulating proposals for developing the accreditation of institutions and study programmes and d) assessing the procedures implemented by the institutions themselves to ensure quality (Convention de Coopération 2000: § 19.1 & 19.2).

As regards the procedures related to the quality of teaching/learning run by the universities, responsibility varies. In some places, the central administration of the institution can be responsible, whereas in others one finds more diluted arrangements encompassing members of the Rectorate and the faculty/department. In other cases still, responsibility rests only with the faculty/department that eventually decides upon the modes of operation.

Areas: teaching, study programmes and audits

At the institutional level, three areas are generally addressed: teaching, unit audits and institution-wide audits. OAAQ's domain of activity will cover, as noted, institution-wide and study programme accreditation. In both cases, however, the procedures will need the agreement of the institutions.

Procedures: internal and external

The procedures used by the universities vary according to the area considered. As regards the quality of teaching, the procedures are process oriented, in line with the formative objective attributed to the policy as a whole. Generally, these procedures take place at the end of the academic year via a questionnaire passed to students. These procedures are compulsory in the sense that where they actually take place, it is not possible for a member of staff not to participate. As regards the audit of particular units, the procedures are organised on the basis of an internal self-assessment followed by an external peer review (Roulet 1994).

As regards the OAAQ, it is still too early to identify the type of procedures that will be developed. The federal administration has made clear, however, that the Organ will have to use both quantitative methods, i.e. numerical indicators, and qualitative methods, i.e. peer reviews. In addition, all the procedures to be developed by the Organ will be on a voluntary basis.

Uses: internal use only

The prime use of the information collected during the procedures is internal to the institution. The formative objective of the policy and the emphasis on outcome-oriented procedures explain this internal focus. There is no link between the potential results and other domains of the policy, for instance funding.

This section has outlined the current structure of the quality assurance policy domain in Switzerland. It has highlighted the uneasy balance to be found between cantonal autonomy and federal requirements for greater co-ordination. It is this uneasy balance that the following pages attempt to reconstruct.

8.6. Quality Assurance Policy in Swiss Higher Education: The Diachronic View

This section analyses the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue in the Swiss context and the process through which it has been structured to adopt the form observable today.

8.6.1. The Policy Context

Quality assurance was not regarded as an issue in Swiss HE until the late 1980s. Its emergence in the political arena needs to be analysed within the general transformations that have been taking place over the last decade or so. Before then, some experiences in the domain of quality assurance had been taken place in some institutions since the mid-1970s[114]. These were one-off experiments and remained largely un-standardised.

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[114] This is for instance the case of the EPF in Lausanne where a Chair of Pedagogy and Didactic was established in 1973 (Ricci 1997: 19). It offered support to academic staff wishing to evaluate their teaching via questionnaires passed to students. This, however, remained a voluntary exercise and the use of the information was up to the staff that had been evaluated. Other types of informal evaluations did take place

A first sign of departure from this situation could be seen in a 1989 CSS report recommending the introduction of some type of procedures for the evaluation of the institutions and the study programmes (CSS 1989: 22-23). This, however, did not radically challenge the general opinion of the CSS that Swiss HE remained of high quality. As stated in a later report:

> "[the] Swiss system is undeniably in a good position compared to other OECD countries. Its relatively elitist character, the wages as well as the Federal structure explain that the conditions of study and teaching remain favourable. The indicators of scientific "productivity" also show that our country, taking into account its limited dimensions, occupies a good position in international comparison, more specifically in basic research, a domain where the universities play a crucial role."[115]
>
> CSS 1993: 5

Despite the general positive context, universities had progressively taken up the CSS recommendation. From this perspective, the publication of the 1996-1999 planning report of the CUS noted the development of evaluation procedures among the universities (CUS 1994: 158).

If quality assurance had not traditionally been a central issue in Swiss HE, the situation was beginning to change. What had then happened? Three converging factors seem to have played an important role in the emergence of the quality debate: the numerical expansion of Swiss HE, the decline in public subsidies and the revision of the different university Acts and the federal Act on the EPFs.

Even if modest when compared to other European countries, Switzerland experienced an increase in the number of students entering HE. Between 1985 and 1998, the number of new entrants grew by 24% (OFS 2000) and that of the total number of students by almost 25% for the period 1985-97 (OFS 1998a). This expansion had been met within the existing structures,

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in some other institutions. They were undertaken by individual academics wishing to know their students' opinions on the course they delivered. This was for instance the case in Geneva University where evaluations of teaching were carried out regularly since the early 1980s. Later, Geneva went on to set up a help service providing advice as to how to construct a valid questionnaire and how best to use the results (Ricci 1997: 31). The actual impact of these teaching evaluations is difficult to estimate even if, one could argue, some modifications might have been introduced. The objective was primarily a pedagogical one and the experiences were undertaken by people who had a personal interest in improving their teaching.

[115] Personal translation. The original quote runs as follows: "Le système universitaire suisse est incontestablement en assez bonne position par rapport aux autres pays de l'OCDE. Son caractère relativement élitaire, le niveau de salaires ainsi que la structure fédéraliste expliquent que les conditions d'études et d'enseignement restent favorables. Les indicateurs de "productivité" scientifique montrent également que notre pays, compte tenu de ses dimensions restreintes, occupe une place de choix dans la

no new institutions being set up until 1996. More significantly, the number of first degrees delivered over the period increased by almost 40% and the percentage of 21 year-olds entering HE reached 19% (OFS 2000). Table 8.1 and Figure 8.2 summarise the most significant figures of the expansion.

TABLE 8.1. STUDENTS IN SWISS UNIVERSITIES AND EPFS 1980-2003

TABLE REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

Source: enrolled: 1980: CUS (1994: 9); 1985 to 1995 OFS (1998a: 7); 2000 and 2003 CUS (1998a: 245). New Entrants: 1980 to 1995: OFS (2000); 2000 and 2003: CUS (1998a: 245). All figures include post-graduate students.

FIGURE 8.2. INCREASE IN AGE PARTICIPATION INDEX IN SWISS HIGHER EDUCATION 1980-1998

TABLE REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

Source: OFS 2000

The expansion of Swiss HE was slowly but surely under way. It was not, however, accompanied by a parallel increase in financial resources. The opposite was actually happening. Public participation in the funding of Swiss HE had diminished since the early 1990s. Pressures to reduce expenditure were strong both at the federal and cantonal levels. This was principally the aftermath of the economic crisis that hit Switzerland during that period. Basic federal subsidies were reduced in real value when the number of first degrees delivered was increasing, as indicated in Table 8.2. The cantons were not able to compensate

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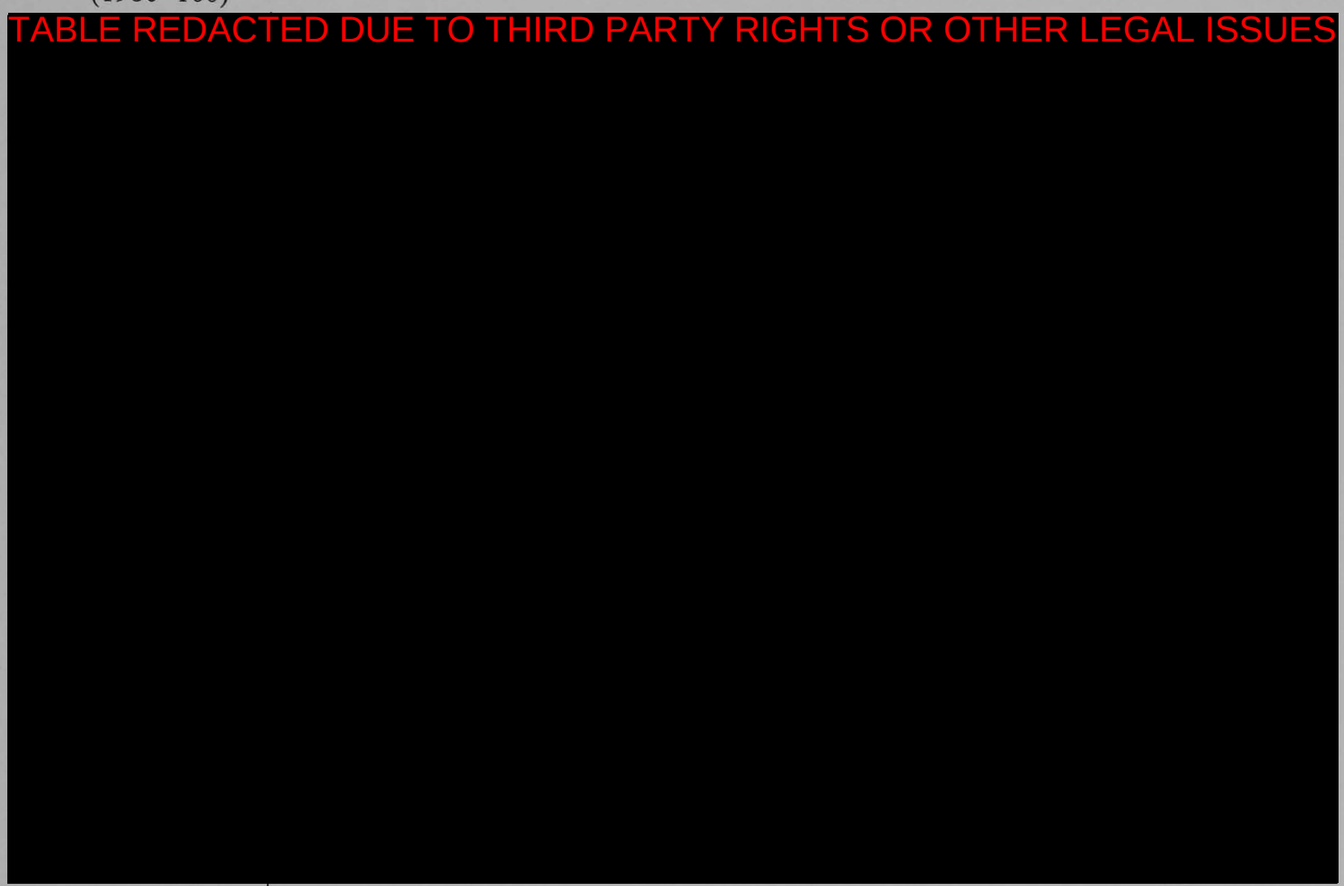
comparaison internationale, plus exactement dans le domaine de la recherche fondamentale, domaine dans lequel les Universités jouent un rôle important" (CSS 1993: 5).

for these financial losses. On the contrary, most imposed severe cutbacks in public expenditure from which the universities were not exempted. These reductions resulted, among other things, in the impossibility of appointing new staff to meet the increase in student numbers (CUS 1994: 18).

TABLE 8.2. COMPARED EVOLUTION OF FEDERAL BASE SUBSIDIES (BS) AND DEGREES DELIVERED 1980-1996 (1980=100)



Source: personal elaboration from CUS (1998a: 240)[116]

The combination of the increase in student numbers and the reduction of financial support raised concerns about the quality of teaching. These concerns principally addressed the academic staff/student ratio and highlighted the fact that standards might be under threat. In addition, in a context of severe financial cutbacks, the issue of quality assurance was also seen as a means for a more rational planning of the whole HE system. In the 1996-1999

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[116] Until the passing of the new LAU, the federal authorities allocated base (or operating) subsidies to fund operating costs and investments below 300,000 Swiss Francs. They were calculated in relation to the number of students, academic staff salaries and expenditure on equipment and investments below 300,000 Francs. The actual subsidy rate varied between 35 and 60% of the qualifying amount, according to the financial resources of the canton. The first degrees referred to here are the *Licence* and *Diplomes* (First HE degrees, equivalent to the British Bachelor degree). The figures include the compensation for inflation according to the *Swiss Consumption Price Index*.

planning report, the CUS sketched out three areas where evaluations would have a role to play (CUS 1994: 158). First, quality assurance policies had a local objective to fulfil, i.e. improving teaching and research in the different institutions. Second, if the different institutional procedures could be harmonised they would also play a regional role insofar as they would permit the development of better task sharing among the institutions. Third, both at the local and regional level, evaluation procedures would be helpful in ensuring that the funds made available to the institutions of HE were used efficiently.

Within this context, potential future orientations were sketched out (CUS 1994: 161-162). The local/regional role of evaluation was reiterated alongside the objectives it would have to fulfil. All evaluations addressing supra-university issues, i.e. related to the regional level, should be co-ordinated and performed by a supra-university body whose organisation, prerogatives or shape were not discussed. The CUS also proposed two potential scenarios as regards the shape quality assurance policy could take in the future. On the one hand, each university would be allowed to develop its own internal system and a national body would be responsible for meta-evaluation procedures. On the other hand, a common system would be set up for all the universities and the national body would perform the evaluations. The CUS also mentioned that the best solution would be a mixed arrangement where a central national body would be responsible for the co-ordination of institutional experiences and the undertaking of evaluations at the national level whereas the "field work" would remain a responsibility of the institutions themselves (CUS 1994: 162). These early proposals left some important issues un-addressed: no mention was made of the methods the different procedures would use, the domains that would be covered or the tasks the potential national body would be made responsible for. Nonetheless, they are a clear sign that quality assurance was emerging as an important issue.

This concern was going to be further highlighted by the revision of the legislative frameworks of all HE institutions. The origins of the revisions can be traced back to a 1989 CSS report in which several transformations of the then existing legal structures were proposed (CSS 1989). Some cantons responded to this early call for change, but they were a minority. But more was to come. In 1993, the CSS published another report, whose subtitle – *Quality, Autonomy, Competitivity, Task sharing* - gave a clear hint as to the orientations to be followed: greater co-ordination among HE institutions and the political authorities; increased

institutional autonomy; new forms of internal governance and greater emphasis on quality control. The report made clear that, in order to meet the objectives, cantonal University Acts had to be modified (CSS 1993: 43-44).

In the meantime, the Confederation had revised the EPF Act, granting the Federal Institutes greater autonomy and institutionalising the principle of quality control through periodical evaluations (EPF Act 1991). Expectations were high to see the cantons following identical routes, but the results turned out to be disappointing. Despite convergence in the general principles, the new university Acts differed in areas such as institutional autonomy or the reinforcement of internal governance structures. Disparate responses could also be seen in the issue of inter-institutional co-ordination and the extent to which universities themselves, and the Cantons, were able to plan their future orientations. The way quality assurance was addressed also varied. Most the new Acts acknowledged the importance of developing some kind of quality assurance procedures[117]. How this was to be achieved, however, differed from place to place, making it difficult to discern common features throughout the system.

These differences do not undermine the fact that by the second half of the 1990s the issue of quality assurance had gained widespread consideration among the institutions, the political authorities and the different bodies involved in HE policy. The federal administration had played a crucial role in this regard and continued to do so in the future. The revision of the university Acts had not met expectations. Cantonal autonomy had prevailed and the results had seen local peculiarities taking advantage over better co-ordination in the entire system.

This situation was going to be modified by the revision of another piece of legislation: the federal Act on financial assistance to universities. Through the revision of the LAU, the Confederation followed two objectives: introducing new patterns of funding and transforming the governance structure of the entire system. During the revision, however, the issue of quality assurance was not left aside. Over the months, it became one of the most sensitive elements of the reform. The point of dispute crystallised on the proposal to create an independent body responsible for quality assurance and accreditation in HE. Let us see how.

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[117] For instance, in Neuchâtel, the 1996 Act provides for periodical evaluations of teaching and research of the different units and for an evaluation of academic staff for confirmation of a tenured position (Loi sur l'Université de Neuchâtel 1996 § 41.2).

8.6.2. Towards a Centralised System of Quality Assurance?

In November 1998, the federal government presented the Bill *Promotion of Education, Research and Technology for the Period 2000-2003* (Federal Council 1998). For the first time, proposals regarding future orientations of learning, research and technology were presented together in a single document, thus further highlighting the federal concerns for an integrated policy in HE and research. More importantly for the purpose of this study, the Bill also included a draft for a complete revision of the LAU with a new title: federal Act on assistance to universities and *coordination in HE*. Once adopted, the new Act would provide greater co-ordination among the different components of the sector, reinforced governance structures and centralised quality assurance and accreditation procedures.

The draft of the Bill had been prepared over the summer 1998 by the federal administration under the supervision of the newly appointed Secretary of State Charles Kleiber. It followed the results of the consultation on a Green Paper that began in December 1997 (OFES 1997; Federal Administration 1997). As regards HE, the Green Paper touched upon two main areas (OFES 1997: 4-5). On the one hand, the governance of the system as a whole had to be modified in order to allow for better and closer co-ordination among the different actors. On the other hand, the patterns of funding had also to be changed from mainly input-oriented indicators (number of students, principally) to output-oriented ones (number of graduates, number of publications, etc). The general idea underpinning the whole project could be summarised in two words: competition and co-operation. HE Institutions were to bid for funds and, at the same time, to engage in closer co-operation.

The Green Paper addressed the issue of quality assurance indirectly. It emphasised the high standards achieved by research activities in many disciplines and the attraction exercised by Swiss universities on top foreign academic staff and postgraduate students. Following other official publications, however, some negative elements were also brought forward. They addressed the combination of numerical expansion with budgetary restraints and the subsequent deterioration of teaching conditions. Evaluations were considered as central elements in the process of quality assurance (OFES 1997: 18). They were seen as an indispensable counterpart to increased institutional autonomy and as a useful instrument for institutional management. However, there was no trace of the creation of any particular body responsible for quality assurance as had been proposed by the CUS a few years earlier.

The consultation concluded in late March 1998. While welcoming the necessity of profound structural changes and the need for co-ordination, opinions revealed divergent views. Concerns addressed in particular the proposed structure of task sharing between cantonal and federal authorities as well as the increased powers the CUS would be granted and the forecasted creation of other governance bodies (Vision 1998). Nothing was reported, however, regarding the issue of quality assurance.

As a result of the consultation, the federal government asked the Department of Internal Affairs to work on a new draft of the Act. It recalled its intention to find a document where institutions would be subjected to both competition and co-operation while, at the same time, taking into the account the result of the consultation process. The new LAU would therefore have to follow four principal orientations: national approach to HE in Switzerland; clear outline of the costs and services provided by Swiss HE; simplified structures for policy-making and a re-formed CUS with decisional powers in certain domains (Federal Administration 1998). The revision was carried out by the federal administration, in particular by the OFES in close collaboration with the GSR. The new draft of the future LAU was eventually included in the Bill the federal government presented to the Parliament in November 1998.

To a large extent, the proposed version of the LAU had followed the guidelines sketched by the federal government (*Le Temps* 21.09.1998; Federal Administration 1998). Compared to the Green Paper, some changes were included, especially as regards the methodology used to fund the universities and the intention to see autonomous institutions bidding for a part of these funds. This implied a modification of the traditional patterns of funding from input-oriented methodologies (mainly based on the number of students in the different institutions) into output oriented ones. The instruments that would be used for output-oriented methodologies were, however, vaguely defined. Reference was made to the number of publications and national and/or international research contracts obtained by the different institutions. The patterns of funding were also to be transformed as regards the subsidies for buildings. The Bill proposed to replace them with subsidies granted according to joint projects among different institutions and highly innovative projects.

But the proposal that came out of the OFES was also innovative as regards quality assurance. It suggested that the Confederation and the cantons jointly set up a body responsible for

quality control and accreditation in the whole HE system, i.e. both cantonal universities and EPFs. The Bill acknowledged that responsibility for quality assurance rested with the institutions but underlined the need for the Confederation and the cantons to ensure that this was done on the basis of comparable criteria (Federal Council 1998: 118) and that the new body followed international standards in this domain. It would be responsible for the formulation and implementation of mechanisms for accreditation and for ensuring the coherence of the evaluation procedures developed by the different institutions. In addition, the Bill did not exclud the possibility of seeing the body developing comparative studies of the HE system that would be made publicly available in a perspective of "consumer protection" (Federal Council 1998: 119). As regards organisational features, the new body would operate on a contractual basis with the HE institutions, whose principles would be stated in a Convention of Co-operation to be signed once the LAU would be passed in Parliament (Federal Council 1998: 24; Federal Council 1998: Appendix L § 7).

The reasons brought forward for the creation of a new body responsible for quality assurance can be understood through the combination of national and international factors. On the one hand, quality assurance was presented as an indispensable counterpart to the increased autonomy HE institutions were granted during the 1990s. On the other hand, the setting up of this new body was also justified by the fact that all OECD countries involved in quality assurance disposed of similar independent agencies. Switzerland could not stay behind in a context of increased internationalisation of HE. In addition, the fact that the body's domain of competence would include private HE institutions made it consistent with international standards.

Through its Bill, the federal government proposed a very radical measure. A substantial shift had taken place between the Green Paper submitted for consultation in December 1997 and the version that was going to be discussed in Parliament. The issue of quality assurance and accreditation had gained a relevance it did not have before. No easy explanation can be brought forward to explain this *volte face* but two factors allow for a better understanding of how the situation evolved. The first refers to the role played by the federal administration, especially the GSR and the Secretary of State. The second element more directly addresses the role played by the international context.

A former civil servant in the canton of Vaud (French part of the country), Charles Kleiber was appointed Secretary of State for Science and Research in May 1997. He began working in October that year. Less that three months later, the Green Paper on the new LAU was published. This was too short a period to substantially influence the preparation of the document. Especially when a group had already been working on the project for several months. Before his appointment at the GSR, Charles Kleiber was responsible for the profound transformation of the Hospital sector in Vaud where his methods borrowed from the NPM whose techniques constitute a central element in the new orientations of the HE policy[118]. These orientations are present, to a greater or lesser extent, in most new university Acts as well as the federal Act on the EPFs (2.II.d.1; 3.II.c.5). They are present in the Green Paper too. New relationships between HE institutions and federal authorities are determined, as are those between the Confederation and the cantons. But the issue of control remains absent. Hence the limited attention paid to the means for ensuring that the objectives are met and quality ensured.

Between the end of the consultation and the Bill, the influence of the Secretary of State seems to have increased. One interviewee observed that:

> "Between the two there has been a certain drift. This is probably due, among other things, to the intervention of M. Kleiber. Discussions regarding the new structures of Swiss higher education had started before his appointment and, during the consultation, he marked the project with his imprint a little. But I think that he really influenced the process between the end of the consultation and the draft of the Bill. The consultation ended in early 1998 and the federal administration began to evaluate the results."[119]
>
> 2.II.b.2

Traces of the influence can be found in two publications by the Secretary of State. The first document (Kleiber 1998) appeared in the middle of the consultation process and can be seen as the Secretary of State's personal manifesto on the future of Swiss HE. It described the strengths and weaknesses of the system, the challenges awaiting and sketched out the general orientation for the creation of an integrated network encompassing the three different sectors

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[118] Proponents of the NPM now occupy crucial positions within the new CUS. Charles Kleiber has been appointed president and E. Buschor, Minister of Education of the Canton Zurich and strong supporter of the NPM, vice-president.

[119] Personal translation. The original quote runs as follows: "Entre deux, il y a eu une certaine dérive. Celle-ci est probablement due, entre autres, à l'intervention de M. Kleiber. En fait, les discussions concernant les nouvelles structures avaient commencé déjà avant son arrivée et, dans le cadre de la consultation LAU, il a quelque peu marqué le projet de sa griffe. Je crois qu'il a surtout exercé une influence entre le résultat de la consultation et le projet de loi. La consultation a duré de fin 1997 au début 1998 puis l'administration fédérale a procédé à une évaluation des résultats".

of Swiss HE (Kleiber 1998: 18-35). Quality assurance policies were to play an important role within the new structure:

> "The evaluation of the network, the institutions of HE and their units, the evaluation of technologies, the ranking of disciplines, the setting up of mechanisms for accreditation and quality assurance linked to the generalisation of the European credit system accreditation mechanisms are imposing themselves as key elements in the process of regulation through information and values."
>
> Kleiber 1998: 32

These ideas were taken up again and elaborated further in another publication by the Secretary of State (Kleiber 1999). The overall elements were designed to provide the needed transparency that would allow students to decide where to study. In his reports, Kleiber pointed out that the task of performing evaluation procedures was to be left to the CSS and should account for the disciplinary differences. A look at the report shows that the question of quality assurance and quality control is developed in parallel to a more output oriented approach to Swiss HE. This was particularly clear as regards the procedures of funding allocation, where the Secretary of State argued that information had to be made available on the quality of the courses based on criteria predefined by an "undisputed scientific body" (Kleiber 1998: 29). In this perspective, the imprint of the Secretary of State is visible in the Bill prepared after the consultation.

The role of the federal administration in the emphasis on quality in the Bill may have been further influenced by the conjunction of several international factors. Late 1997, the American Department of Education announced that Swiss faculties of medical studies were no longer on the list of potential destination for bursary students. This was justified by the fact that these faculties, regulated by federal legislation, lacked a proper accreditation from any recognised body. The American decision had an impact on the medical sector in Switzerland. Not so much because of the money lost but much more as regards the status of the different Faculties abroad. Although it is difficult to argue that the American decision started the idea of accreditation, it undoubtedly created an opportune context for its development. In effect, a new Act ruling the medical professions had been under construction since 1993 with the intention to grant greater autonomy to the institutions. Within this context, the issue of quality assurance and accreditation was considered as "indispensable counterparts to the autonomy of the faculties" (Wauters in Vision 1999b: 110). It is interesting to note that the Confederation and the CUS launched a project for the evaluation

of the five faculties of medical studies in Switzerland in June 1998. Less than one year after the American decision. The American event is just an example of the extent to which Swiss HE has been sensitive to the international evolutions throughout the period analysed here. As pointed out earlier, the refusal to join the European Economic Area was a serious threat to Swiss academia. The federal government pushed hard to maintain Switzerland as close to Europe as possible. Funds were made available through the OFES for joining international research teams. At the same time, the Swiss federal administration has been very active on the international scene. It took part in the UNESCO World Conference on HE where the Secretary of State justified the future creation of a quality assurance agency as a result of both the need for greater transparency and the generalisation of similar experiences in the European context (Ostini *et al.* 1999: Annexe 5). In addition Switzerland also signed the Bologna Declaration, thus agreeing to work towards co-operation in quality assurance and the development of comparable methodologies.

Both the appointment of the new Secretary of State and the increasing involvement of Switzerland in the international arena, contributed to the institutionalisation of the idea that quality assurance and accreditation were important issues and that they had to be taken seriously. As noted, however, in order to be turned into policies, ideas have also to confront pre-existing conditions. In the Swiss context, these conditions often take the shape of the different institutional features one has to deal with. As an interviewee recalled:

> "federalism is not necessarily an obstacle. It prevents us from taking too rapid steps. But it does not prevent us from taking small steps in the right direction."[120]
>
> 3.II.c.17

The "right direction" towards quality assurance and accreditation was going to emerge from the debates in Parliament (Federal Administration 1999b). Debates first took place in the Science, Education and Culture Committee of the Upper House. In order to help it make up its mind, different institutional actors were invited to present their views. Among them, the Rector's Conference was the most explicit against the proposals of the Bill, although the general spirit was welcome. For the CRUS, the proposed Act combined different elements rather than providing a clear orientation for the future of Swiss HE as a whole. As regards quality assurance, the Confederation's contribution to ensure the quality of HE was

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[120] The original quote runs as follow: "Le fédéralisme n'est pas forcément un obstacle. Il évite de faire des pas très rapides. Il n'évite pas de faire des petits pas dans une bonne direction".

appreciated but the proposals stated in the Bill were strongly rejected (CRUS 1999: § 4; 2.II.b.2; 2.II.d.1; 3.II.c.19). The Rectors considered that a fundamental distinction had to be made between accreditation and evaluation. The former were concerned with the recognition of individual institutions or programmes of study, whereas the latter addressed the strengths and weaknesses of the institutions or the study programmes and were deemed to be an exclusive prerogative of the universities. As a result, the CRUS approved the principle to create an organ responsible for accreditation procedures only. However, for the Rectors this did not require the creation of a particular independent body, but could be dealt with by a commission formed of representatives from the institutions and whose recommendations for accreditation would be left with the new CUS to decide (CRUS 1999: § 4). This position was defended by the CRUS before the Upper House's Education Commission. The Commission rejected the setting up of such a body on the basis that control of the quality of the institutions was already encapsulated in the proposed legislation through the new methodologies regarding federal financial participation (Federal Administration 1999a).

Accompanied by the recommendation of the Committee, the draft was discussed in the Upper House of Parliament during the 1999 Spring Session. There, the debates largely followed identical lines to those that had previously taken place in the Commission of Science, Education and Culture. MPs opted for the setting up of an independent body, whose actual name was not decided, composed of "two or three" specialists in the area of quality assurance with the help of recognised international experts. During the debates, the task of this small group was defined in the following way. On the one hand, the body would have to propose the accreditation of study programmes and institutions. On the other hand, the body would also recommend procedures for self-assessment to the HE institutions, which is an institutional prerogative and which constitutes the basis for evaluation (Federal Administration 1999a).

The document that eventually emerged from the debates in the Upper House was less ambitious than the proposals made by the federal authorities, although it did not fully reflect the positions defended, for instance, by the Rector's Conference. Rather, it mirrored a mix of both orientations as regards the potential organisation of quality assurance as a policy domain. During the summer of 1999, the debates were transferred into the Lower House. Its Science, Education and Culture Committee decided to support the decisions taken in the

Upper House, especially those concerning the shape of the new CUS and the refusal to set up an independent body for quality assurance and accreditation (Federal Administration 1999c). The members of the Lower House followed the recommendations of their Committee as regards the modification to be introduced to the draft of the LAU and, eventually, adopted it. As a result, by September 1999, Swiss HE disposed of a new legislative framework whose name was modified to better highlight the idea of co-operation among the HE institutions and, in this regard, the more important role of the CUS. To the traditional financial function, the new Act was complemented with another one: co-ordination among the different elements of the domain.

As regards quality assurance, the new LAU defined as follows the tasks of the new agency:

- "to define the conditions for quality assurance and verify that they are met;
- to make proposals for the establishment at national level of a procedure allowing for the endorsement of the institutions that wish to get accreditation either for the institution as a whole or for their branches of study;
- to verify, on the basis of the directives set by the University Conference the legitimacy of the accreditation."[121]

LAU 1999: § 7 al. 2a, b, c

The implementation of the new Act was, however, made dependent on the adoption of two other pieces of legislation. This requirement was a direct consequence of the greater role the Act was granting to the CUS in the co-ordination of the entire HE system and also as regards quality assurance policies. In effect, through the new LAU, both the federal Parliament and governments of the university cantons agreed to abandon some of their prerogatives in HE policy in favour of the transformed CUS. The federal Parliament had done that directly by accepting the new Act but each university canton still had to do the same.

In this sense, an inter-cantonal agreement had to be first reached among the university cantons by which they delegated part of their competencies in the domain of HE policy to the CUS (Concordat Intercantonal 1999). The Concordat aims at reinforcing the relationships between the cantons and the Confederation and determines the extent of the cantonal prerogatives to be devolved to the CUS as part of the process of greater central co-ordination.

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[121] Personal translation. The original quote runs as follows:

- "Définir les exigences liées à l'assurance qualité et vérifier régulièrement qu'elles sont remplies;
- Formuler des propositions en vue de mettre en place à l'échelle nationale une procédure permettant d'agréer les institutions qui souhaitent obtenir l'accréditation soit pour elles-mêmes, soit pour certaines de leurs filières d'études;
- Vérifier à la lumière des directives arrêtées par la Conférence universitaire la légitimite de l'accréditation." (LAU 1999: § 7 al. 2a, b, c)

Once agreed, the Concordat allowed the acceptance of another legislative document, a Convention of Co-operation, determining the general guidelines of the new organisational structure of Swiss HE policy (Convention de Coopération 2000). The Convention was signed between representatives of the Confederation and representatives of the university cantons. It implements the will for greater co-ordination stated in the new LAU, regulates the relationships between the different powers and fixes the competencies of the new CUS. These two documents are also important as regards quality assurance. The Concordat follows word for word the article adopted in the new LAU, whereas the Convention enters more into the details of the organisation and competencies of the OAAQ. This new body reflects the present situation regarding the way quality is addressed in Swiss HE. It encompasses two distinct but complementary dimensions of the process of quality assurance. Its establishment, embedded in the new LAU, highlights the hostile response of a majority of the consulted bodies and agencies. The strong opposition to the federal proposal for a centralised body responsible for quality assurance stresses the importance of the cantons when it comes to introducing change in HE and the necessity to reach consensual agreements.

8.7. Summary and Provisional Conclusions

Swiss HE, as addressed in the present study, encompasses two main sectors, the university and the EPF Domain. These two sectors have historically been under the influence of two different political levels, the cantons for the former and the Confederation for the latter. In recent years, however, increasing concerns for greater co-ordination among the components of the system, both institutions and actors have progressively challenged the traditional dichotomy. The adoption, late 1999, of a revised federal Act on financial assistance to universities and *co-operation in HE* was the culmination a process that began a decade ago. As a policy domain, quality assurance has been profoundly affected by the transformation of HE as a whole. Because the situation is still evolving at the moment of writing, quality assurance in the Swiss context is best characterised by its transitional nature. This makes it difficult to straightforwardly locate the different responses to the fundamental policy choices in one of the pre-determined categories or to determine future orientations, especially as regards the implementation of recent legislation and the consequences for the whole structure. However, these somewhat disappointing elements are counterbalanced by the lessons that can be learned from the Swiss experience both in terms of the rhythm of change

and, to a greater or lesser extent, of the generalisations to other policy domains or national settings.

In effect, Switzerland is, as noted, characterised by a set of mixed arrangements in the sharing of tasks in different policy domains. This makes it hardly possible to identify a unique policy paradigm that governs the quality assurance domain. Rather, cantonal prerogatives in university policy combined with federal responsibility in the EPF Domain have resulted in a variety of actualisations of the fundamental choices in quality assurance.

Throughout the 1970s and early and mid-1980s, HE institutions did or did not act to assure quality, which was generally perceived as good or very good. To put it more straightforwardly, quality was not a political issue but, rather, an occasional institutional preoccupation. The situation began to evolve in the second half of the 1980s and, more increasingly, at the turn of the 1990s. The reasons for that were identified above as the combination of an increase in the number of students entering HE and a reduction of funds from the federal and cantonal governments.

It is difficult to appreciate how much European experiences on quality assurance might have influenced the emergence of the quality debate in the Swiss context. Swiss HE institutions never took part in the European Pilot Project or other related experiences, the exchange of information being done via seminars or workshops organised by the CUS, the CSS or the OFES. However, it can be argued that the presence on Swiss territory of international bodies involved in HE at the international level has had an impact on the increasing importance granted to quality assurance. In this regard, the presence of the CRE, based in Geneva, cannot totally be excluded as an influential factor in the spread of the quality debate.

In fact, the shape adopted by quality assurance policy to arrive at the current situation seems to owe much to another of the factors identified in chapter 3, namely the political institutional features and the political organisation of the territory. In this regard, the Swiss case sheds some light on the extent to which the reform of the *status quo* can happen in HE policy and, more particularly, in the domain of quality assurance, two domains characterised by a strong dependence on the sub-national level both as regards the production of legislation and policy implementation. As shown, reforms initiated by the Confederation needed to obtain a wide support among the different actors involved in the policy domain not only to have the

proposals passed through the different stages of the policy-making process but also to see them properly implemented.

Chapter 9 Discussion

9.1. Introduction

In the previous four chapters, the cases included in this study were presented. Each ended with a summary of the main findings together with some provisional conclusions based on the findings of the particular case. In this chapter, the four cases are considered simultaneously to address the research problem formulated in chapter 1 and to highlight potential future directions. Section 9.2 summarises the theoretical elements discussed earlier as a reminder for the analysis provided throughout this chapter. Then, section 9.3 considers whether cross-national policy convergence has taken place among the four countries and, if so, what the aspects are that have converged. This section limits itself to a detailed description of the structure of quality assurance policy. It does not aim to provide any particular insight into potential understanding of the observed situation. This latter point is addressed in section 9.4, where elements for the comprehension of the current situation are highlighted in terms of different combinations of the factors identified as potentially at play in the emergence of quality assurance as an issue and in the subsequent construction of the policy domain. Based on these elements, section 9.5 discusses potential future directions of the quality assurance policy in the four countries in the light both of very recent trends at the national and international levels and the information provided by knowledge of the past. Section 9.6 ends this chapter with a summary of the main conclusions.

9.2. Theoretical Recapitulation

The notion of policy convergence was discussed in chapter 2 on the basis of two main arguments. The first one was that policy convergence could not be assumed *ex ante*, but needed to be verified *ex post* after an empirical investigation. From this theoretical standpoint, it was assumed that other dimensions had to be taken into consideration as potential outcomes of the comparison of the developments of national policies. Four orientations were distinguished: *convergence*, *divergence*, *persistent difference* and *persistent similarity* (see Figure 2.1).

Together with this theoretical position, chapter 2 developed a second argument as regards the notion of policy convergence. It indicated that, as a concept, convergence had to be

understood as a process through which two (or more) policies *become* more similar in a number of aspects. As such, it had to be distinguished from the *moment* when two (or more) policies *are* similar. This then led to the recognition that a distinction had to be drawn between the diachronic and the synchronic dimensions as different analytical levels, which enriched the discussion with diachronic (convergence or divergence) and synchronic notions (difference and similarity). Separated at the theoretical level, these two arguments are combined to address the first part of the research problem: whether there is cross-national policy convergence and to what extent. The combination assumes that the development of the national policy over time is verified by the comparison of two different moments, the situation at the present time with the situation that was observable when the issue of quality emerged on the political agenda (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

In chapter 3, quality assurance in HE was approached as a policy domain within which particular policies are formulated and implemented. These policies, like any others, consist of two interrelated dimensions: the *policy beliefs*, understood as worldviews about how a policy domain should be organised, and the *policy instruments*, as the means through which these beliefs are translated into action. Both policy beliefs and policy instruments have to be understood as analytical devices. Combined, they constitute useful instruments to analyse the response to the *fundamental policy choices* in the domain of quality assurance. These fundamental policy choices were considered to encompass five different elements: the *objectives* of quality assurance policy, the *control of* the policy domain, the *areas* of investigation, the *procedures* to be applied and the *use* of the information collected. In order to delimit the area of investigation, a number of potential responses were devised in chapter 3. These were constructed in terms of pairs of oppositions and reflected the different options available to each of the fundamental choices.

The responses to these fundamental choices form the structure of the policy paradigm governing the domain of quality assurance in a particular place and at a particular moment. Consequently, considering whether national policies have converged over time can be achieved by looking at the responses currently provided for these choices and comparing them to the situation at the moment when quality assurance emerged as a political issue. Similarly, assessing the extent of policy convergence can be achieved by analysing the responses provided to the different fundamental choices.

Addressing these two points is the objective of the first stage of the present comparative discussion and is dealt with in section 9.3. This first stage, however, only considers one side of the research problem. As such, it does not provide much of an understanding for the reasons why cross-national policies have developed in the observed way. To address this point, the factors identified earlier as potentially at play in the emergence of quality assurance as an issue and in the construction of the national policy domain need to be analysed alternatively, which is done in section 9.4.

9.3. Is There Policy Convergence?

This section assesses whether policy convergence has taken place among the four countries and the extent to which this has been the case in terms of policy beliefs and policy instruments. The discussion follows the theoretical framework elaborated in chapters 2 and 3. First, the starting and arriving situations in each country are sketched out. On the basis of this information, the discussion then compares the development of the four national policies for quality assurance in HE.

9.3.1. The *Status Quo Ante*

The following paragraphs summarise the situation from which the four countries embarked on the construction of the quality assurance policy domain currently observable.

By the turn of the 1980s, English HE was characterised by the existence of a binary divide. The universities were largely autonomous from the political authorities. Quality was, by and large, taken for granted and was an exclusively internal matter dealt with through the principle of external examination. It is this principle, together with the position of HE towards the government, that was going to change so dramatically in the years ahead. On the other side of the binary divide, the polytechnics were under the tight control of the LEAs. Moreover, external scrutiny of these institutions' activities was exercised by the CNAA and HMI. It was on this general ground that the debates around quality assurance in HE would emerge in the early 1980s.

In the Netherlands, the quality debate also emerged at the turn of the 1980s. By then, the two sectors of HE were undergoing important transformations upon which the issue of quality

assurance took hold. The objective was to modify the structure of the system itself, especially the disorganised sector of higher professional education, to improve the dropout rate (perceived as being very high) and to redefine the position of the state towards HE. The then existing procedures for quality assurance, based on *ex ante* controls of inputs through legislation and regulation, were to be replaced by ex post controls through assessments.

As far as Spain is concerned, quality assurance in HE emerged on the political agenda during the second half of the 1980s. The context was marked by the adoption of new legislation in which quality was related to the assessment of the teaching and research activities of individual members of staff. These procedures were carried out jointly by the MEC and the universities. The large institutional autonomy granted was complemented by a regionalisation of HE policy, which saw the seventeen CCAAs gaining increasing powers in this domain.

Finally, in Switzerland quality assurance was, until the early 1990s, a minor issue dealt with by the institutions. Individual experiences addressed the improvement of teaching, mainly through questionnaires passed to students. In general, the bodies responsible for the formulation of HE policy (the CUS, the GSR and the OFES) considered, until the early 1990s, that quality in Swiss universities and the EPFs was high. This belief was challenged by the economic crisis of the 1990s. HE policy was a shared prerogative of the federal and cantonal levels, with the latter coming increasingly under pressure to further co-ordinate their policies and modify the legislative frameworks of their universities.

Having provided an overall account of the starting situation in the four countries, the focus now turns to the situation the four countries have reached.

9.3.2. The *Status Quo Post*

After a journey of unequal duration, the policies formulated by the four countries in the domain of quality assurance eventually adopted their current shape. Figure 9.1 sketches out what this shape is. It offers a combined account of the policy beliefs and the policy instruments and has a double utility in the present discussion. On the one hand, it pictures the *status quo post* in each country. On the other, it serves as the basis for a more detailed

FIGURE 9.1. RESPONSES TO THE FUNDAMENTAL POLICY CHOICES

Policy Belief		England	The Netherlands	Spain	Switzerland
	Objectives	• Summative with some formative arrangements	• Formative *BUT* becoming summative	• Formative *BUT* becoming summative	• Formative
Policy Instruments	Control	• Central government	• Umbrella organisations • Central government	• Individual institutions • Central government • Regional government	• Institutions • Central government • Regional government
	Areas	• Teaching • (Research) • Institutions	• Teaching • (Research)	• Teaching • (Research) • Institutions	• Teaching • (Research) • Institutions
	Procedures	• Outcomes • Internal self-assessment & external peer-review • Quantitative & qualitative techniques • Compulsory	• Process & outcomes • Internal self-assessment, External peer-review & meta-evaluation • Quantitative & qualitative techniques • Compulsory	• Process • Internal self-assessment & External peer-review • Quantitative & qualitative techniques • Voluntary	• Process • Internal self-assessment & external peer-review • Qualitative techniques • Voluntary
	Uses	• Internal use • Large external use • Large external publicity in different forms • Unofficial rankings	• Internal use • Little external use *BUT* • Increasing importance of publicity • Unofficial rankings	• Large internal use • Little external publicity • No rankings	• Still too early *BUT* • Internal use • Little external publicity • No ranking

analysis of the responses provided by each country to the fundamental policy choices as of December 2000.

By then, the issue of quality assurance had become a cornerstone in UK HE. The structure of the policy domain illustrates the transformations that had taken place throughout the HE system. First, the binary divide has disappeared, thus leading to a policy for quality assurance common to the two former sectors. In the policy domain, the most visible body since 1997 is the QAA. The latter operates on the basis of a contract passed with the HEFCE. The objectives of the policy domain combine summative and formative arrangements and place a substantial emphasis on meeting accountability requirements. Emphasis on the summative aspects influences the procedures that are developed. These are outcome-oriented and combine qualitative and quantitative techniques for the collection of information. Procedures cover teaching assessments and institution-wide audits. In line with the summative objectives attributed to the procedures, the information collected is widely publicised and often displayed by the press in ranking formats. Formative arrangements are related to the feedback provided by the external team of experts during the on-site visits (see 5.5).

The situation in the Netherlands shows that summative objectives now complement the original formative ones. A shift from process to outcome has, thus, taken place in the approach to quality assurance from process to outcome. As regards the control of the policy domain, the institutions' umbrella organisations retain substantial prerogatives. These are combined with the indirect role of the government through the HE Inspectorate. The procedures of quality assurance cover the areas of research and teaching. They are organised on the basis of an internal self-assessment followed by an external peer review. The third stage involves a meta-evaluation carried out by the HE Inspectorate on behalf of the government. The collected information is aimed at improving the institutions' approaches to quality, which is in line with the formative objectives. However, the attention paid to more summative objectives and outcome-oriented approaches to quality assurance procedures means that there are increasing concerns to use these procedures as a means to provide information to society at large.

In December 2000, the Spanish PNECU was reaching the end of its first phase. The principal objective underlying the whole exercise was formative. Hence the focus on process-oriented

approaches. A particularity of the organisation of the Spanish domain lies in the holistic approach to quality. Another particularity is the total liberty granted to the institutions to take part or not in the procedures and, if they do, to decide what areas they would like to assess. The latter can combine research, teaching and general management of the institutions. Procedures are organised on the basis of an internal self-assessment followed by and an on-site visit of external experts. Both qualitative and quantitative techniques are used for data collection. Under the first PNECU, the use of the information collected was solely used for internal purposes and, according to the formative objectives, aimed to improve the understanding of the quality assurance procedures. This situation is likely to be modified in the coming years.

Finally, the Swiss case presents a transitional situation. By December 2000, the new OAAQ was about to begin its activities, thus becoming the first body of its kind in the country. The transitional nature of the Swiss case only allows for a general overview of the situation of quality assurance. In this regard, it appears that the objectives of the procedures will be strongly formative and focused on processes rather than outcomes. The overall organisation of the policy domain will be strongly dominated by the CUS to which the OAAQ will have to report and which will make any definite decision regarding potential accreditation. Similarly, the institutions will retain a large degree of autonomy as regards their intention to enter the accreditation process or any other quality assurance procedure the OAAQ would decide to undertake. As regards the uses of the information, former experiences indicate that it will remain primarily an internal affair and that little publicity will be given to the outcomes of the evaluation procedures that are not related to accreditation.

9.3.3. Dimensions of Policy Convergence

So far, this section has offered a synchronic outline of the situation regarding quality assurance in the four countries at two moments of time. The next paragraphs provide the dynamic counterpart needed to address the first part of the research problem, namely whether the developments of national policy indicate a convergence of national policies and, if so, to what extent. They look at the aspects that have converged and at those that have not. In terms of analytical devices, this obliges the use of synchronic (i.e. convergence/divergence) and diachronic (similarity/difference) concepts simultaneously.

Overall, the data collected for the construction of the case studies indicates that the four countries have *in general* become more similar as regards the domain of quality assurance policy in HE. This supports the view that cross-national policy convergence, as defined for the purposes of the present study, has indeed taken place.

In the four countries, quality assurance in HE has become an issue worth addressing by the formulation of particular policies. A shift has taken place through which one has passed from a situation where quality in HE was taken for granted and largely remained within the sphere of the institutions to one where it has been openly questioned. The analysis of the official literature in the four countries has allowed for the identification of common elements underlying the importance of quality in HE, although the context within which these claims were made differed significantly from one country to another. Concomitantly, the emphasis on quality has meant that more and more people have been involved in the formulation of new policies, their implementation and, as far as academics are concerned, their discussion and criticism. Quality assurance has, in the four countries, become an industry of its own, absorbing large amounts of (public) money and no lesser amounts of personnel involvement. It is, precisely, in this particular regard that cross-national policy convergence has taken place, a convergence towards the construction of more systematised domains within which these instruments are formulated and make sense.

However, observing that national policies are now more similar than they were some two decades ago in general terms does not hide the fact that substantial differences remain in several aspects. In effect, as the contrast between the two *status quo* situations confirms, cross-national policy convergence is far from being homogenous throughout the responses to the fundamental policy choices treated in this study. From this perspective, it is the extent of the convergence that has to be looked into. To that end, one can resort to the distinction devised earlier between policy beliefs and policy instruments and summarised in Figure 9.1 above. Such a discussion makes it possible to address the second part of the research problem, although, as noted, it does not elaborate into the reasons why the observed differences and/or similarities exist, which is dealt with in the next section.

9.3.3.1. The Policy Beliefs

Policy beliefs account for the general views, ideas and standpoints about how a particular domain should be organised. They constitute the normative core upon which the responses to

the fundamental policy choices are based. Figure 9.1 above shows the current beliefs about the objectives of quality assurance policies, which determine the types of instruments used in each country.

The comparative analysis of the four countries indicates that cross-national policy convergence among policy beliefs in the four countries has occurred in the importance of quality assurance as an issue and in the relevance of summative objectives for the whole policy domain.

In this regard, the Spanish and the Dutch cases are most interesting. They highlight the re-orientation of the objectives that has taken place from the moment when the importance of the quality issue was recognised to what can be observed nowadays. The situation in the Netherlands is illustrative of a shift in the beliefs about the objectives of the policy domain. From strictly formative objectives and emphasis on processes, the situation has moved towards greater consideration being paid to summative ones and outcome-oriented procedures. As shown in chapter 7, this shift took place at the end of the first phase of the quality assurance procedures. It was reflected in the increasing use of quantitative methodologies and instruments alongside those, more qualitative, that were in operation earlier. What is important to bear in mind here is that the implementation of the policy beliefs was taken over by the institutions' umbrella organisations. This allowed the HE system to retain control of the general orientations, while meeting government requirements. The Spanish experience shows an interesting similarity with the Dutch one. Here too, a progressive shift has occurred towards quality assurance procedures pursuing more summative objectives. Moreover, this shift also coincides with the end of the first five-year period of the PNECU and can be observed in the proposals brought forward for the second phase (BoE 2001).

The Dutch and Spanish experiences are good examples of two countries engaging in a modification of the policy beliefs about the objectives of quality assurance policy. Although it is too early to draw definite conclusions, the information collected for these cases suggests that they are adopting similar orientations by combining the "original" formative purposes with summative ones.

In contrast, in England the objectives of the policy domain were encapsulated from the very beginning in the belief that public money had to be used efficiently. This was the case for all

sectors of public activity and deeply affected HE. The 1980s financial cutbacks were accompanied by serious concerns for accountability. It is within this context that the summative orientation of the policy domain and the emphasis on outcome-oriented procedures has to be understood. Over the years, beliefs in the summative objectives have been ratified by successive governments and are still dominant today. This, however, has not prevented debates from emerging. Rather, the analysis of the English case highlighted the opposition between governmental agencies and the universities about the objectives upon which the unified system of quality assurance should be based. The recollection of the debates that preceded the establishment of the JPG underlined the resistance of the HEQC to endorse measures that would damage institutional autonomy and ignore the formative dimension of quality assurance. Eventually, the outcome of these debates demonstrated the predominant role of the government within the policy domain.

How does the Swiss situation fit into this general discussion on policy beliefs? Experiences at the institutional level showed that the primary objective was traditionally oriented towards formative purposes. It is legitimate to assume that, within a context characterised by the strong influence of the sub-national level, similar orientations will be maintained in the near future. A look at the beliefs about the organisation of HE policy as a whole supports this view. As shown, this domain is a joint responsibility of the Confederation and the cantons. As a result, any reorientation of quality assurance policy needs the agreement of both political levels. The recent debates about the establishment of the OAAQ reflect the combination of powers and the impossibility of imposing a particular orientation unilaterally.

Taken together, the four countries present some signs of convergence in terms of policy beliefs, although this convergence is far from total. In each country, the issue of quality assurance has been recognised as important enough to develop particular policies. At first, the policies were supported by beliefs that differed from one country to the other, almost certainly because the context of the emergence of quality assurance as an issue was different. However, the country reports indicate that, over the years, changes have taken place in the objectives, especially in the Netherlands and Spain, which suggests that convergence has indeed taken place at the level of the policy beliefs, although only partially.

Having discussed the extent of cross-national convergence as regards one of the components of quality assurance policy, the discussion proceeds with the analysis of the other component, the policy instruments.

9.3.2.2. The Policy Instruments

The second dimension taken into consideration to assess the extent of cross-national policy convergence relates to the instruments through which the policy beliefs are translated into practice. Here, the study has focused on pairs of oppositions, as presented in section 3.3.

The analysis of the four countries points to the *procedures* as the policy instrument showing the largest degree of cross-national similarity although, within it, the categories elaborated earlier also reveal noticeable differences.

Similarity appears in the stages the procedures go through in the four countries: internal self-assessment, external peer review and final reporting to the agency in charge. The study of the national trajectories shows that this way of proceeding was not present in the four countries when they first engaged in the formulation of quality assurance policies, but is something they have come up with over the years. The Netherlands and, to a lesser degree, England developed methodologies based on these three stages. In the former case, however, the discussions between the political authorities and the institutions' umbrella organisations also provided for a meta-evaluation to be undertaken. Later, Spain and Switzerland adopted a similar structure.

Regarding the other categories encompassed under the policy instrument *procedures*, the comparative analysis indicates that there is no cross-national policy convergence. Rather, the study shows a correlation between the objectives stated for the policy and the types of approaches adopted (process/outcomes) as well as the techniques used to collect the information (qualitative/quantitative).

In England, the summative objective comes together with outcome-oriented approaches and relies on quantitative data. These elements are consistent with the accountability orientation of quality assurance policies in this country. In the Netherlands, the shift in the beliefs about the objectives has also influenced the type of approaches that have been developed, passing from clearly process oriented procedures to procedures having a stronger emphasis on the outcome-oriented dimensions. The shift has also influenced the type of techniques used, which now combine quantitative and qualitative elements.

Spain and Switzerland form a different pair of countries. Here, the formative objectives have led to emphasis being put on process-oriented approaches. As regards the techniques for data collection, Switzerland shows preference for qualitative techniques, whereas Spain combines both qualitative and quantitative ones. Spain and Switzerland are also countries where taking part in the procedures is totally voluntary, whereas in the Netherlands and England institutions of HE are obliged to take part.

Cross-national similarity can also be observed in the *areas* in which quality assurance policies are implemented. Section 3.3.3 identified three possible areas where quality procedures could be introduced: research, teaching and learning and overall institutional management. The information collected for the country reports shows that the three areas are being dealt with in England, Spain and Switzerland, although it often happens that each is dealt with separately. The Netherlands is a particular case, inasmuch as institutional management is not currently addressed.

As far as the *use* of the information collected is concerned, the analysis of the four countries shows substantial cross-national similarities. The use of the information collected strongly depends on the objectives assigned to the policy. In this regard, summative objectives would imply more externally oriented uses, whereas formative objectives would imply more internally oriented ones. This relationship appears in the four countries but does not work so straightforwardly.

In England, the stated combination of summative and formative objectives has meant that externally-oriented procedures in teaching assessment are developed alongside internally-oriented ones. Practically, however, it can be argued that concerns for external accountability, in the provision of information to external stakeholders, especially to prospective students and employers, are the dominant features. Logically, the use of the information collected meet these requirements, as shown by the attribution of scores to six predetermined aspects of educational provision. The information gathered during the subject reviews permits the subsequent classification of the assessed units and the constitution of rankings. The latter is a widespread trend in England and leads to the preparation of league tables on the basis of the results obtained during the procedures (Yorke 1998). In this regard, the role of the media is worth mentioning, as newspapers are determinant vectors in the

promotion, construction and spread of league tables (Lund and Jackson 2000: 22-23; Morrison *et al.* 1995; Yorke 2001).

In the Netherlands and Spain, the information collected is also publicised, whereas in Switzerland, neither the early institutional experiences nor the current proposals have emphasised such a possibility. In the two former countries, however, the means through which information is made available to the external world differs. The Spanish PNECU includes a yearly publication of the results of each call for proposals (CU 1997, 2000a). In contrast to England, rankings of the universities based on some type of quantitative information do not exist. This point should, however, be balanced in the light of recent developments that have seen the CU launching a discussion on the introduction of quantitative indicators (CU 1999c) and various newspapers publishing league tables of the best universities in the country (*El Mundo* 28.05.2001). Finally, the Dutch experience shows increasing concerns for the publication of the results. Not only are the reports of the external reviewers made available to the public but, in addition, two recent publications have attempted to offer information on a ranking-model, a trend supported by the government as noted earlier.

The emphasis put on the publication of results, especially in the form of rankings or other quantitative displays, highlights the increasing emphasis put on the competitive dimension of HE. Underlying the development of such documents is the belief that they can have a decisive impact on how prospective students chose the institution they want study at.

This is a clear trend in England where universities are placed in strong competition with one another. Getting a high result is therefore essential, not so much in terms of direct funding, but more in terms of reputation. Prospective students can access this information to select a place of study, although the extent to which they do so is questionable (HEFCE 1999a: 29-47, 1999b).

As regards the *control* of the policy domain, the data from the four countries show that this is another area where substantial differences remain. In the four countries, the norm appears to be that the control of the domain of quality assurance policy is not characterised by a total independence of the bodies responsible for the implementation of the policy. The lack of autonomy is noticeable in the relationship of the body responsible for quality assurance policy and the institutions of HE or the political authorities.

The English case can be seen as a paradigm. This is because of the type of relationship between the bodies responsible for quality assurance, the QAA and the HEFCE. As noted in chapter 5, the latter has a legal responsibility to ensure that standards in the universities are monitored and to look after the quality of the HE system. Since its creation, the QAA has signed a contract with the HEFCE to perform this task on its behalf. As a result, the room for manoeuvre enjoyed by the agency is limited.

In other countries, control of the policy domain shares a similar lack of independence from the body in charge. In the Netherlands, HE institutions and the political authorities share control of the policy domain. In this case, there is no particular agency dealing with quality assurance, the responsibility resting with the institutions' umbrella organisations.

The combination of institutional and political responsibility is also the case in the Spanish context, but in a different form. As discussed earlier, control of the PNECU remains with the CU, a body combining the three levels involved in HE policy: the central government, the CCAAs and the universities.

Finally, the Swiss case shows some similarities with the Spanish experience. The analysis of the recent developments in the domain of quality assurance has highlighted how the recently established OAAQ resulted from a compromise between the federal and cantonal governments.

This section has addressed the first two aspects of the research problem. First, it offered an evaluation of whether the national policies formulated in the domain of quality assurance in the four countries converged or not. The answer to this question is a mixed one. Admittedly, cross-national convergence has taken place but only in general terms. As noted, quality assurance has progressively been recognised as an important issue in the four countries and decisions have been made, in terms of policies, to address it. A look at the two dimensions of the policy, the beliefs and the instruments, provided an answer to the second part of the research problem. In this regard, the discussion has pointed out the differences in the belief underpinning the determination of the objectives of quality assurance policy and how these differences affected the types of instruments formulated in each country. As a result, it is possible to characterise the current developments in the four countries through the use of an oxymoron: *convergent diversity*. The combination of these two words provides a fair summary of the trajectories of the four countries. On the one hand, they have recognised the importance of the issue of quality assurance in HE and have engaged in the construction of a

systematised set of instruments. On the other hand, however, the recognition of the importance of quality assurance has not led to the formulation of similar policies. Rather, as the above analysis has pointed out, similarities are only observable in some aspects of the policy domain, whereas in others substantial differences prevail.

So far, the comparison of the four countries has not provided much of an understanding of the observed differences and/or similarities. This point is now addressed in order to answer the third part of the research problem.

9.4. Understanding Differences and Similarities

As stated in the introduction and further discussed in chapters 3 and 4, this study attempts to account for the multiplicity of factors at play in the production of policy outcomes. In this sense, it approaches the understanding of potential cross-national differences and/or similarities in terms of configurations of factors. On the basis of this assumption, several factors potentially at play in the domain of quality assurance policy on the basis of a double distinction have been identified: internal or external to the domain of HE and originating from national or international contexts[122]. This allowed the construction of a 2x2 matrix of factors considered as catalysts of the quality assurance debate or crucial in the shape adopted by the policy domain over the years (see Figure 3.5). The distinction was established following the assumption that the conditions of the emergence of quality as a political issue can influence the subsequent evolutions.

The comparison of the four country reports shows that all the potential factors have been observed in the four national settings, though not all have been observed in each case. Rather, the factors have configured in particular ways, some being present in one country and absent in another, which means that not all of them were equally relevant for each national context. Consequently, it is possible to argue that the four countries show evidence of substantial uniqueness as regards either the factors that resulted in quality becoming a political issue or those that most influenced the construction of the national policy domain.

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[122] It is important to recall that because of the limited time and resources allocated to the completion of this study, the international dimension was given less consideration than the national counterpart. Future research should compensate for this imbalance.

9.4.1 Factors at Play in the Emergence of Quality Assurance as a Political Issue

As noted earlier, quality assurance has become a political issue during the 1980s. Before then, it was largely taken from granted. Procedures did exist in some places, such as the external examiner system (England), the individual questionnaires passed to students (Switzerland) and the *ex ante* control procedures through legislation and regulations (the Netherlands). These traditional procedures were substantially modified in the years that followed.

Among the factors at play in the emergence of the debate on quality assurance, the comparative analysis of the four cases shows that it is difficult to identify one or more of the selected factors as common to the four countries. Rather, none of the countries has been influenced by the same factors at the same time, although it is possible to point out some combinations of countries confirming the impact of certain factors as central elements in the emergence of the quality debate in each national setting. The following paragraphs offer a comparative discussion of the extent to which each factor has influenced, or failed to do so, the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue in the different countries.

9.4.1.1. National-Internal Factors

The *numerical expansion* of the HE systems, the *dropout rates* and the role of *institutional bodies* and other professional associations working in HE were identified as potential factors at play from within the national environment and the system of HE in the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue.

Comparatively, these factors have not performed equally in each national context. The literature often relates the massification of HE to concerns about the possible threat it could pose to standards and quality. Massification would, consequently, lead to the emergence of quality assurance as an issue. The study of the four countries indicates that such a relationship either did not always exist or, if it did, was not presented as an important factor. The relationship was observed in the Dutch and Swiss cases, it was less visible in the Spanish one, and was absent in the English case. As a result, *expansion* and *dropouts* cannot be considered as factors offering a total understanding of the emergence of the quality debate in the four countries analysed here.

In this regard, the English case is interesting. As shown, the English system of HE remained within the elitist segment of Trow's categorisation until well into the 1980s. By then, the issue of quality assurance had been on the political agenda for more than half a decade. The then Secretary of State for Education, Keith Joseph, had already asked the universities and the polytechnics to show that they were taking the issue of quality seriously. This had been going on since the early 1980s and was, at the moment of the expansion, gaining increasing importance, as indicated by the establishment of the AAU by the universities. In addition, during the same period, it was generally admitted that the quality of teaching and learning remained high, thus preventing any claims in terms of increasing dropout rates. Although early concerns were expressed by the CVCP's representatives regarding the potential consequences of the early cutbacks imposed on universities' funding allocation, the overall level of British HE was still considered as satisfactory throughout the period and, indeed, until the early 1990s. In this regard, the 1991 White Paper stated that:

> "The teaching and the scholarship in our universities, polytechnics and colleges are rightly held in high regard both at home and internationally."
>
> DES 1991: § 18

The English experience is an exception compared to the three other countries, where an expansion of HE took place before quality assurance became a prominent political issue, although the extent to which this increase influenced the emergence of quality assurance policies in these countries varies.

As noted, the relationship between the expansion of HE and the emergence of quality assurance is certainly valid for the Netherlands and Switzerland, less so for Spain. In this latter case, the expansion of the system was well under way when the MEC launched the first experiences of quality assurance in research and teaching. Neither the expansion of the system nor the dropouts have been identified in the published documentation consulted or during the interviews as one of the reasons that pushed the political authorities to develop quality assurance procedures.

This was not the case in the Netherlands or Switzerland. In the Netherlands, the overall policy for HE, as formulated since the end of the 1970s and during the early 1980s, aimed at meeting the expansion of the system and the dropout rates, considered to be high. These factors, however, were encapsulated within much broader policy orientations (see below). Similarly, the discussion of the Swiss case indicates that quality assurance became a real issue only in the mid-1990s, precisely when the numbers of new entrants were beginning to

increase, though rather modestly compared to the other European countries. In this country, however, dropout rates were never considered an issue at that moment, although they were portrayed as a potential threat for the future because of the deterioration cutbacks would cause to student support (CUS 1994: 18).

Similarly, the role of the *institutional bodies and other professional associations* is a significant factor in the emergence of the quality debate. In England, the CVCP reacted promptly to government expectations by setting up the Academic Standards Committee in 1983. In the following years, this Committee was to play an important role in the construction of the quality assurance policy domain. Similarly, the Dutch umbrella organisations of the institutions were also involved from the early stages. It was these that took control of the procedures to be developed and, through negotiations with the government, arranged the framework that, to a large extent, still remains in place today. Other examples of the role played by the institutional bodies can be drawn from the Spanish CU and the Swiss CUS. The former developed alternative policies to those formulated by the MEC in the late 1980s, whereas the latter kept records of what individual universities were doing in terms of quality assurance and made proposals for potential future developments.

9.4.1.2. National-External Factors

Regarding the factors at play within the national environment but not directly related to HE itself, the study looked into the *general policy orientations* of each country, especially those regarding the *reductions in funding* and the *changing role of the state*. It was assumed that, together with the expansion of HE systems, these could be further factors promoting the emergence of quality assurance in the four countries.

The study of the four countries has highlighted that, indeed, the emergence of quality assurance as an issue coincided with the formulation of policies that would have profound consequences throughout the political and societal arenas. However, when looking comparatively, it is possible to point out that the *funding restrictions* and the *changing role of the state*, were not present in all four countries, which, again, prevents any straightforward conclusion regarding how pertinent they are to understanding the emergence of the quality debate.

First, the *reduction of financial support* to HE was apparent in three out of the four countries, namely, England, the Netherlands and Switzerland but was absent is Spain. In the three former countries, the moment when quality assurance emerged as a political problem was indeed characterised by substantial cutbacks imposed on HE and most public domains together with concerns about accountability and efficiency. As noted, at the turn of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, the Dutch political authorities had formulated a series of policies aimed at reducing the involvement, partly financial, of the state within large parts of society. It is within the context of the corrective and facilitative reforms for HE that the specific debate on quality assurance was encapsulated. Similarly, from the mid-1990s, the Swiss federal government progressively diminished its financial support of the universities and the EPFs. The cantons did not compensate universities for these financial withdrawals but, rather, imposed further cuts. This was cause for concern because of the potential danger from the combination of financial reductions and numerical expansion, especially in terms of student/staff ratio.

In England, the Conservative Government elected in 1979 soon imposed a series of cuts in the sums allocated to HE. However, in contrast to the Netherlands and Switzerland, these cutbacks took place at a time when expansion was not on the agenda. Therefore, the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue in English HE cannot be understood as the result of massification or a fall in the overall standards. Another factor has to be considered, the *changing role of the state.*

Changes in the role and place of the state seem to have been at play in the period when quality emerged in the public domain in England, the Netherlands and, to a lesser extent, Switzerland. In England and the Netherlands, the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue coincided with the coming to power of right-wing majorities in the respective Parliaments. In England, the Conservative project of rolling back the frontiers of the state had been explicit since the publication of the 1979 Manifesto, although what eventually happened was an increase in the control exercised over the system, as the directions adopted since the mid-1980s clearly indicate. The early stages of the project reflected themselves in financial cutbacks, as just noted, and demands for greater financial accountability and efficiency. HE institutions on both sides of the binary divide were increasingly under pressure not only through the financial cutbacks but also through the requirements to demonstrate that they were meeting government expectations in terms of mechanisms to ensure quality. The quality

debate, in this country, was directed by Sir Keith Joseph for whom the most important success of his years as Secretary of State for Education was to shift the debate from quantity to quality and to put quality on "top of the agenda" (Joseph in Ribbins and Sheratt 1997: 83).

In the Netherlands, a coalition formed by the Liberal Party and the Christian Democrats took power in 1982. As noted earlier, this coalition was determined to put the Dutch economy back on track by a set of measures that strongly hit HE. It was also decided to put an end to the traditional planning policies that had characterised previous governments and that had failed to face up to the aftermath of the first oil crisis. The effects on HE were substantial. Retrenchment policies were introduced and the type of relationship between HE and the political authorities was transformed. The shift in the policy style from planning to the steering-at-a-distance type meant that the type of control moved from *ex ante* to *ex post* procedures, and, within this context, larger room for manoeuvre was granted to the institutions with the subsequent requirement that they develop some instruments to ensure the quality of the provision in a context characterised by system-wide transformations, expansion and concern about dropouts.

The Swiss situation shows some of the elements present in the English and Dutch experiences. Although less radical than the other two cases, Switzerland has also experienced a period in which views regarding the role of the state have shifted. New-right attacks on the welfare state and the involvement of the state in the management of public affairs were observable in the mid- and late 1990s. They culminated in the publication of a "White Book" proposing a set of measures to reduce the (financial) involvement of public collectivities (de Pury *et al. Eds* 1996). However, the peculiar organisation of the political arena and the deeply embedded belief in negotiated policy outcomes prevented any radical move. Changes in the role and place of the state, however, were certainly at play in the emergence of the quality debate, but in a different form from in the English and Dutch experiences. In Switzerland, what was observable throughout the 1990s was an increasing trend, from the Confederation, to gain more power in HE policy, a domain largely under the responsibility of the cantons. This trend has been visible since the early 1990s and the creation of the GSR. It acquired great relevance with the appointment of Charles Kleiber as Secretary of State for Education and Research and through the draft of the new *Act on Federal Assistance to Cantonal Universities* that began in 1997. By implementing the draft, the federal government

wanted to become more active in the definition of HE policy and, in particular, quality assurance. However, because of the strong opposition from the cantons, the Confederation was unable to implement the type of quality assurance it had hoped to.

In Spain, the expansion of HE, that gained a decisive momentum during the second half of the 1980s, was not accompanied by a reduction in financial support. Rather, the contrary happened after the passing of the 1983 LRU. The proportion of GDP destined to HE was increased to a considerable extent as a means of catching up with other European countries and to compensate for the endemic lack of investment that had been the norm until the consolidation of democracy. The influence of the changes in the nature of the state as a factor permitting an understanding of the emergence of the quality debate cannot be certified by the evidence from the Spanish case. Admittedly, the nature of the state had radically changed when the 1983 LRU was adopted but this historical event was not of a similar nature to the changes that were being experienced in other European countries, especially in England and in the Netherlands as far as this study is concerned.

9.4.1.3. International-Internal Factors

To understand the reasons why quality assurance became such a prominent issue in HE in the four countries, the research also proposed looking into factors internal to the domain of HE itself but originating outside the national environment. In this regard, two major elements were identified: the *institutional bodies and other professional associations* involved in HE policy at the supra-national level and the process of *internationalisation* of HE policy.

The comparative analysis indicates that this particular set of factors has not been relevant in any of the countries. This result is not very surprising as regards England or the Netherlands if one takes into account the fact that these two countries were pioneering the field when they engaged in the debates on quality assurance in their respective systems of HE. In effect, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, quality assurance was to a very large extent absent from the international scene. As a result, international factors of the kind addressed in this part of the study might simply not have been at play in the English or Dutch debates.

A similar conclusion can be reached for Spain, although in this case examples certainly did exist from which ideas could be borrowed. As indicated in chapter 7, the early experiences developed in the domain of quality assurance derived from the implementation of the 1983

LRU. This legislative framework was formulated and adopted in a context when other European countries were beginning to change their approaches to quality assurance and linking them to larger institutional autonomy or accountability. In the Spanish context, however, the legislator did not follow identical patterns but opted to avoid any explicit link between the increased institutional autonomy and quality issues.

Switzerland was, as noted in chapter 8, the last of the four countries analysed here to address the issue of quality assurance. In this sense, it might have been expected that some influence from the above-mentioned factors would be observed, which has not been the case. Rather, like the three other countries, Switzerland seems to have been most affected by national factors as regards the emergence of the debates.

9.4.1.4. International-External Factors

The last point on the Swiss situation can be elaborated a bit further in this paragraph on the international factors that are not directly related to HE. In this regard, the study attempted to determine whether the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue could be understood through the role played by *supra-national institutions* like the European Union.

The comparative analysis of the four countries does not allow for a definite answer on this point. Together with the elements presented in the previous paragraph, this suggests that the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue was primarily a national question in which the international context had no relevant role. However, the study of the Swiss and Spanish experiences permits a reconsideration of the international-external category of factors.

In Switzerland, for instance, the refusal to enter the European Economic Area in December 1992 was a detonator that accelerated the path of the transformations of the whole HE policy. The decision can be interpreted, retrospectively, as a major impulse in favour of more co-ordinated and, to some extent, more efficient policies. It allowed federal authorities to further manifest their intention to abandon the role of simple payers to become central actors in the formulation of HE policy and, within this context, to make radical proposals in the domain of quality assurance.

Whereas the Swiss case indicates signs of mistrust towards Europe, the Spanish experience highlights the opposite trend. This element is not easily explainable with the type of data obtained in the study. However, as one interviewee noted, Europe represented, if not a model, certainly a point of comparison, and an important place to look at. As one of the

interviewees put it: "In Spain, if you say that something is done in Europe, you will see that many doors are suddenly opened" (1.III.b.12). In this perspective, the "attraction" to Europe, and more generally to the international context, was noticeable in the debates that surrounded the progressive construction of the quality assurance policy domain, as is further discussed below.

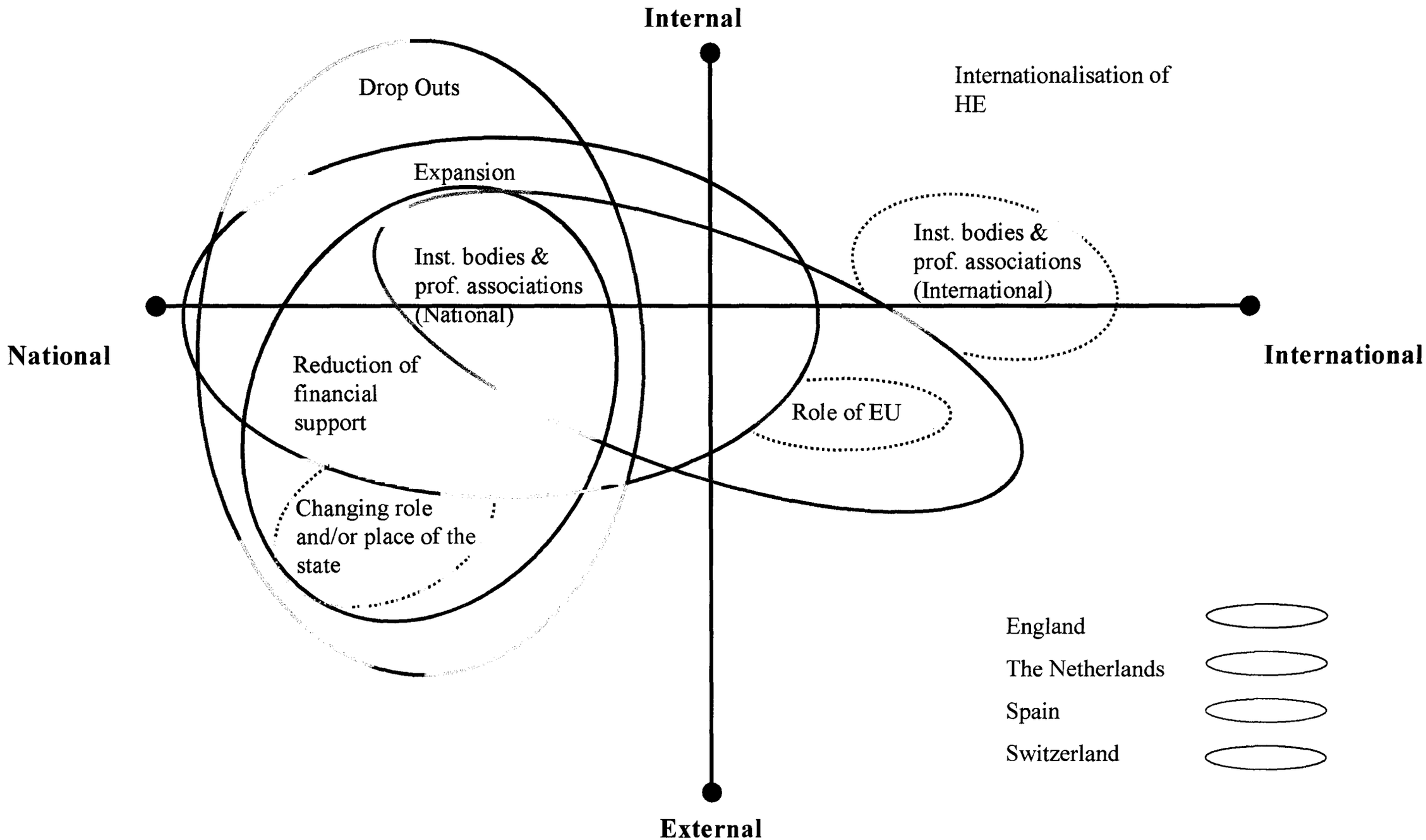
This section has offered a comparative overview of how the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue can be understood. To that end, the discussion has revisited the different set of factors identified earlier as elements to understanding why the quality assurance debate emerged in the four countries. What appears from this discussion are the differences that apply to each case. The factors have, indeed, configured in very peculiar forms from one country to another, which makes it very difficult to identify common elements. Despite this difficulty, Figure 9.2 offers a general summary of the extent to which the different factors can be considered as potential elements for the understanding of the emergence of the quality debate in each country.

Having discussed the conditions that prevailed on the emergence of the quality debate in each country, the chapter now turns to the analysis of the reasons why the national policy domains have adopted the form currently observable. Here too, a number of factors are brought forward as elements that can help understand the current form of the national policy domains and, consequently, the differences and/or similarities among them.

9.4.2. Factors at Play in the Construction of the Quality Assurance Policy Domains

This section discusses the extent to which the factors identified earlier as potential influences in the construction of the quality assurance policy domain actually help understand the form adopted by the policy domain as summarised in Figure 9.1 above. It follows a structure identical to that adopted in the previous paragraphs, so that each set of factors is analysed alternatively.

Figure 9.2. Configuration of Factors at Play in the Emergence of Quality Assurance as a Political Issue



9.4.2.1. National-Internal Factors

Among the factors originating from within the national environment and the domain of HE, the study has looked into three elements: a) the *organisation of the national systems* of HE; b) the *overall governance* of HE and quality assurance as policy domains; and c) the *role of institutional bodies and other professional associations*. At first sight, the comparative analysis shows that these factors have been most influential in the construction of the respective national domains of quality assurance, although, again, not all of them have been equally relevant in each case. It is nonetheless possible to argue that cross-national differences as discussed earlier (section 9.3.3), especially concerning the responses to the policy instruments, can best be understood through these national-internal factors. Let us see how.

As noted in chapter 5, the current structure of the quality assurance policy domain in England provides a good indication of the influence of the national context. In this country, the organisational features of the HE system have strongly affected the construction of the policy domain. As noted, the merger of the two sectors in 1992 brought together two different traditions of dealing with quality assurance. On the one hand, there were the universities. Through the CVCP, these had reacted promptly to concerns from the government about standards and quality. These reactions, however, focused primarily on means to retain and improve the traditional system of external examination and, by so doing, to prevent any intervention from outside the sector. It was only by the end of the 1980s that the universities agreed on the establishment of an agency of their own, the AAU, to run institutional audits. But even this decision might be considered a protective move from true external scrutiny of the universities. On the other hand there were the polytechnics. As pointed out earlier, these had been the object of strong scrutiny from various external bodies. To a very large extent, the polytechnics were accustomed to having people from outside their walls evaluating and assessing them. From this perspective, the coming together of the two sectors also meant the coming together of radically different *ethos* as regards the way of approaching quality assurance and, more in general, the accountability requirement. The different policy instruments previously in operation on each side of the binary divide had to be somehow reformulated to fit within the two different traditions.

This latter point has to be related to the role of the bodies made responsible for quality assurance after the passage of the 1992 *Further and Higher Education Act*. The latter divided

responsibilities for quality assurance between the sector of HE itself and the newly established national Funding Councils. How the new university sector dealt with its responsibilities was, as shown, a crucial element in the construction of the policy domain. The HEQC soon engaged in animated discussions with the CVCP, its formal mentor. When the debates emerged regarding the possibility of abandoning the binary divide in quality assurance, the difficult relationship did not help the universities much. Rather, it substantially favoured the HEFCE's views on the role of the sector in the domain of quality assurance and the objectives the system would have to pursue. In this regard, the accountability concern and the provision of information were re-confirmed as the central policy beliefs upon which the domain of quality assurance had to be based.

In the Netherlands, the prevailing shape of the quality assurance policy domain owes much to the *governance of the system of HE* and the role played by the bodies responsible for policy formulation therein. As noted in chapter 6, changes in governmental policy style and policy beliefs in the early 1980s led to a modification of the relationships between the political authorities and the HE institutions. The changing governance patterns meant that universities and higher professional education institutions were granted increased autonomy for the management of their own affairs. These changes in the policy beliefs affected the domain of quality assurance. The institutions themselves, through their respective umbrella organisations, played a crucial role in the formulation of the responses to the fundamental policy choices, through the policy instruments, and the implementation of the procedures. Within this context, the sector retained large prerogatives, whereas the political authorities maintained the supervision of the procedures via the HE Inspectorate. The structure of the Dutch HE system certainly played a role in the differences in the policy instruments that could be found in the early stages. However, these would mainly concentrate on the areas to be looked at and the procedures to be used. The difference between the university and non-university sectors, in terms of policy instruments, eventually faded away when the HBOs adopted, at the end of the 1980s, a structure very similar to that in place in the universities.

Like the Dutch case, national-internal factors in the Spanish context have been determinant, especially through the impact of the *governance features* of the HE system and the *role of the institutional bodies*. The *organisational features* of the system did not apply in this case because most of Spanish HE consists of universities. In Spain, the current form of the quality

assurance policy domain is strongly related to the autonomy granted to the universities. This is reflected in the principle that the latter are in no circumstances obliged to participate in the PNECU. Moreover, if they decide to do so, they are free to choose the modalities that suit them best as regards the domains they want to have assessed. The role of the CU was also significant in the construction of the policy domain inasmuch as it constituted an alternative to the proposals that had emerged from the MEC in relation to the assessment of individual members of staff.

Finally, in the Swiss case, the *role of the bodies* involved in the HE policy-making as a whole has been important in the construction of the policy domain. This has been especially the case for the bodies of the federal administration, i.e. the GSR and the OFES. The response to the issue of *control* of the quality assurance policy domain, shows distinctly that the federal authorities had to take into account the claims of other actors involved in HE policy, especially those sitting in the CUS. As noted, the latter is now the "home" of the recently established OAAQ.

This point reveals what seems to have been the most important factor in the construction of the policy domain in Switzerland: the *overall governance of HE*. This is closely related to the national external factors and will be further addressed below. For the moment, it is important to recall that the historical division of tasks between the federal and cantonal levels has led to the latter being very cautious as regards their autonomy in the domain of HE. Recent developments in the area of quality assurance, especially those described in the second part of chapter 8, need to be recontextualised within a redistribution of forces within the HE policy domain as a whole and the increasingly important role federal authorities would like to have.

9.4.2.2. National-External Factors

Among the factors external to the domain of HE but originating from within the national context, the research looked into the impact of two interconnected elements, the *national political features* and the *political organisation of the national territory*. It was assumed that the construction of the national quality assurance policy domain responded to broader societal transformations and, to a certain degree, to the distribution of power over the territory, with sub-national political levels having, gaining or loosing responsibilities in HE policy. The comparative study of the four countries confirms this assumption.

In Switzerland, the political structure of the country has meant that the formulation of nation-wide policies has to be negotiated between the Confederation and the cantons. Education in general and HE in particular have historically been very sensitive domains. The way the quality issue has been dealt with is paradigmatic of the situation. A proposal for the establishment of a central body for quality assurance emerged from federal authorities. It was first rejected during the pre-parliamentary debates held in the Commission for Science, Education and Culture of the Upper House. As noted earlier, the Commission did not oppose the views that some kind of quality control was actually needed but they rejected the proposal on the grounds that such an agency would have taken over cantonal responsibilities. In this sense, it was claimed that federal authorities already controlled the quality of the different institutions through the funding methods introduced by the new LAU. Eventually, the type of agency that was adopted differed substantially from the one originally proposed by the federal authorities. It was the result of a negotiated agreement between the Confederation, the cantons and the HE institutions. Each actor agreed, through the Convention of Co-operation, to abandon part of their prerogatives in favour of a renewed and reinforced CUS within which the OAAQ is located.

In the Spanish context, the relationships between central and regional government have also undergone certain modifications during the last two decades. The study of the construction of the quality assurance policy domain in this country has pointed out the influence of the governance of HE as a whole. As noted, prerogatives over HE policy have progressively shifted from central government to the CCAAs. This shift has mirrored broader political trends towards de-centralisation and regionalisation of policy-making and implementation. This process did not itself influence the emergence of the quality debate in Spain. It nonetheless affected the structure adopted by the policy domain under the PNECU. The latter was based on the belief that the objectives had to be formative and all the instruments formulated aimed to meet this objective.

Together with the problems that could have arisen if the procedures had been linked to summative purposes, the regionalisation of the policy would have been a problem as well. In effect, by 1995 most CCAAs had gained prerogatives over HE on their territory. Part of these prerogatives was the determination of the budget, which was a question to be solved by the region itself. Within this context, linking the results of evaluation procedures to any

summative purpose would have contradicted the actual autonomy of the regions in the funding of HE. The regionalisation of policy has affected HE and the quality assurance domain through the creation of some regional agencies that are responsible for the development of quality assurance within the regional territory. As noted, this is the case in Andalucia and, above all, in Catalonia. The latter has developed policies that run in parallel to the PNECU and the co-ordination with the central authorities of the CU only concerns methodological issues.

The influence of factors external to HE in the construction of the quality assurance policy domain was significant in the English case. In chapter 5, it was noted that a dramatic shift towards governmental control and regulation has taken place in English HE over the period analysed here. Quality assurance policies played an important role in this process. The coming to power of the Conservative Party in 1979 heralded the beginning of a new era for HE. Initial measures aimed at reducing funding allocations and HE policy were implemented during the first term and intensified during the second when the Conservative Party enjoyed the largest parliamentary majority of the whole period. The majority in Parliament was an opportunity to re-direct the policy (Watson and Bowden 1999: 246) towards accountability and efficiency concerns. In the context of the *Westminster Democracy*, general policy orientations could hardly be opposed due to the lack of institutional veto points and limited control from Parliament. To some extent, and to some extent only, the Upper House managed to challenge part of the 1988 ERA in those aspects that seemed most directly to question academic freedom but it fell short of preventing the radical transformation of HE, especially as regards its control.

External factors help understand the current shape of the British quality assurance policy domain in another way. In this case, it is the *political organisation of the territory* that was at play. As noted, during the 1980s strong opposition emerged between central and local governments. In the domain of HE, the decline of local government political prerogatives can be linked with governmental attempts to take the polytechnics out of LEAs' control. To that end, the government used the concept of institutional autonomy in a variable way. On the one hand, universities were considered to be enjoying too much autonomy and not to be sufficiently accountable. On the other hand, the polytechnics were under strong scrutiny from the LEAs with little room for manoeuvre. The two sectors were played against each other,

which had major consequences for the construction of the quality assurance policy domain as noted in the section above.

Compared to the English, the Dutch experience shows that political parties located on the same political spectrum, getting into government at approximately the same time and sharing similar beliefs as regards the role of the state in HE and, more generally, in society at large, can lead to different policy outcomes, depending on the institutional context. In the Netherlands, the *political features*, rather than the organisation of the territory, had an indirect influence on the construction of the policy domain. This indirect influence relates to the shift in policy style and overall policy beliefs from planning to greater *laissez faire* or, as indicated in chapter 6, steering-at-a-distance. This shift led to a profound redefinition of the moment of control exercised by the political authorities over the HE sector. In this regard, new instruments were formulated. They focused much more on *ex post* procedures of control, in contrast to the strictly legislative *ex ante* procedures existing previously. The influence of the political features in the construction of the policy domain can also be seen through the importance granted to the search for a consensual solution. As noted in chapter 6, discussions took place after the publication of the 1985 HOAK between the political authorities and the representatives of the sector in order to devise a means for operationalising the government will to relate autonomy to quality control. The government did not attempt to impose its views unilaterally. Rather, in line with the accommodation culture that influenced the Netherlands so much, discussions took place among the different actors from which the objectives and instruments to meet them emerged.

9.4.2.3. International-Internal Factors

International factors originating within the domain of HE were also considered to be elements that could help understand the current form of the quality assurance policy domain in each country. Two factors were addressed more particularly: the *international bodies and professional associations* working in HE and the process of *internationalisation of HE.*

The comparative analysis indicates that the influence of these factors has been particularly noticeable in Spain and, to a lesser extent, in Switzerland. In the former case, the influence of the broader international context could be observed from the beginning. This was especially important in the development of an approach to quality assurance that would be an

alternative to the then dominating procedures based on the assessment of individuals. This alternative was eventually going to be the so-called institutional evaluation. The international factor also appears to have been an important element in the Spanish context. This is particularly true as regards the CRE, which conducted institutional evaluation reviews during the early 1990s in which several Spanish universities took part.

As far as Switzerland is concerned, the impact of international factors has also been observed, although it has not been possible to identify influences as clearly as in the Spanish case. Rather, the impact seem to have been most important as regards the internationalisation of HE and the risks of seeing Switzerland being left behind. As noted earlier, the international context has been a key factor in the changes that have affected Swiss HE policy in recent years.

The extent to which England and the Netherlands have been affected by the international developments in the domain of quality assurance differs. On the one hand, as regards the English case the research has not been able to identify elements supporting the view that the construction of the policy domain was influenced by international factors. Rather, both the review of the policy documents and the information collected from the interviews confirm that the shape taken by the quality domain in England was principally influenced by national features. This does not mean that England has been isolated in this regard, as members of different English bodies were, and still are, active in international agencies and other professional associations involved in quality assurance at the European level.

A similar situation emerges from the Dutch experience. The construction of the policy domain has also mostly been influenced by national factors. However, the Dutch experience has been one where the instruments that were adopted have attracted other countries. This highlights the fact that the Netherlands has to a substantial extent been exporting experience and knowledge in the domain of quality assurance, especially within the EU. In this regard, it is worth noting that it was under the Dutch presidency of the EU that a first recommendation was made regarding European co-operation for quality assurance in HE, an element that would further be developed in the 1991 Memorandum and, eventually, the 1994-1995 Pilot Project.

9.4.2.4. International-External Factors

This paragraph addresses the last element taken into consideration in the present study, i.e. the influence of international factors that are external to the domain of HE. Here, it was proposed that the impact of the supra-national institutions, especially the EU be looked into. Like other international factors, this one does not appear to be equally influential in the four countries. The study of the English experience has not identified a particular impact of the projects formulated from the European Union either during the Pilot Project, in which no English university took part or, more recently, in the process of integration highlighted by the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations.

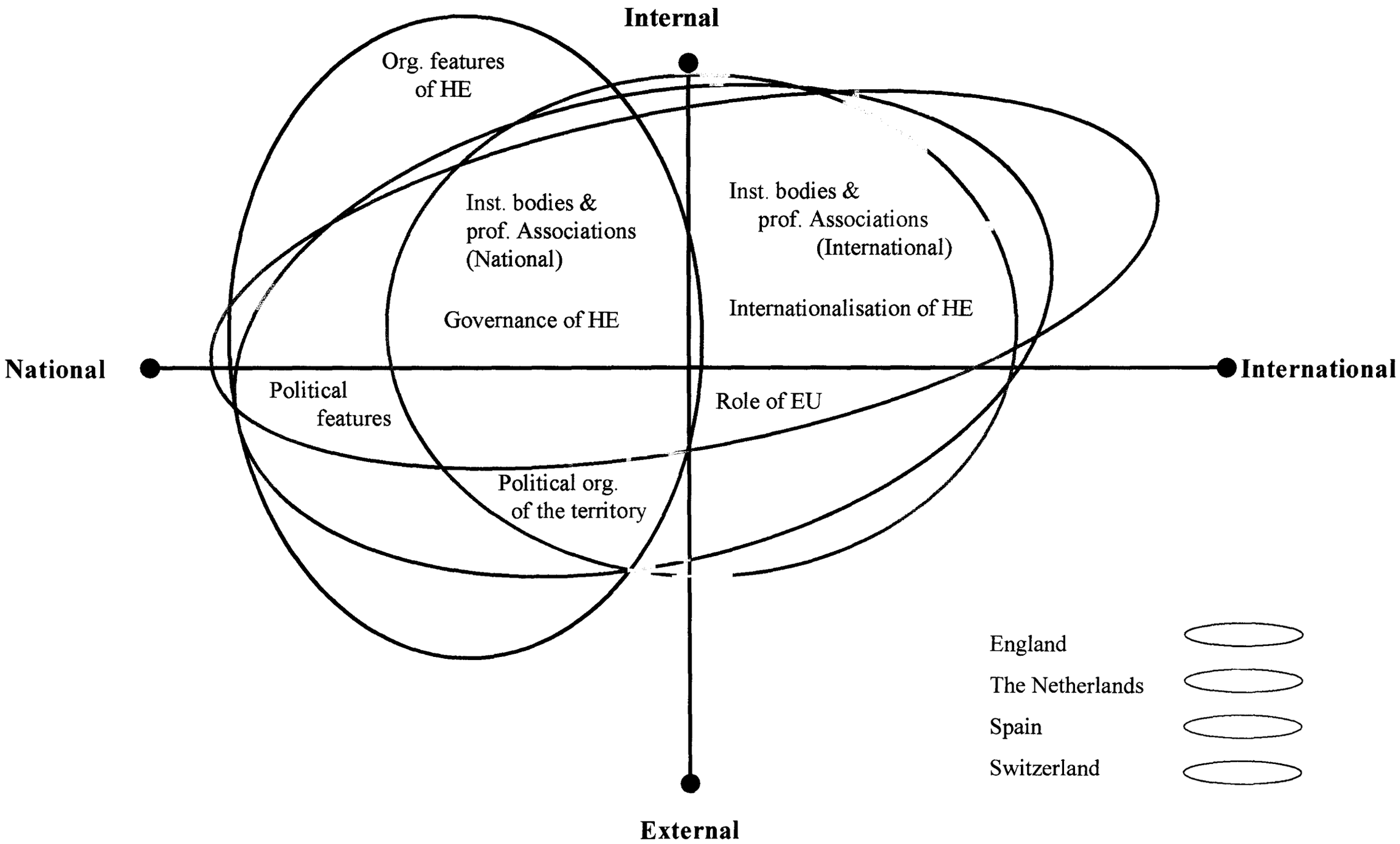
The three other countries have, however, shown indications that the European level has affected the construction of the policy domain. This is evident in the Spanish case where the current structure of quality assurance policy owes a substantial debt to the European Pilot Project, as indicated in chapter 7. In Switzerland, it has not been possible to detect as clear evidence as for Spain. However, following the experiences developed abroad was one of the objectives of federal authorities when they announced their intention to create the OAAQ.

This section has attempted to provide some understanding of the current structure of the quality assurance policy domain in the four countries. In doing that, it has also pointed out some potential reasons for cross-national differences and similarities in terms of responses to the fundamental policy choices.

From this discussion, the research indicates that the factors inside the policy domain of HE and originating within the national environment have, in the four cases, played an important role in the construction of the quality assurance policy domain. Consequently, these are the factors that can help understand the form adopted by the national policy domain. Concomitantly, their particular configuration within each country also permits a better understanding of the reasons for the observed cross-national differences and/or similarities. Figure 9.3 offers an overview of the combination of the different factors.

Having discussed the influence of the different factors in the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue and the construction of the policy domain, possible future orientations are outlined in the following section.

Figure 9.3. Configuration of Factors at Play in the Construction of the Quality Assurance Policy Domains



9.5. Possible Futures

So far, this chapter has addressed the different aspects of the research problem. The comparative analysis of the four country reports has highlighted the co-existence of differences and similarities across the various aspects of the national policies. This confirms that although general cross-national policy convergence has taken place, it has not affected the national policy domains as a whole. Rather, noticeable differences remain both in terms of the policy beliefs governing the different national domains and the policy instruments used for translating the beliefs into practice. Moreover, even when policy beliefs are similar, similarity in the policy instruments does not necessarily follow. This observation indicates that international demands for increased homogenisation of national policies had only partially been addressed, and reinforced the national variable as a critical element in the formulation of policy outcomes.

On the basis of these findings, the present section outlines potential orientations of quality assurance policy in the four countries. Such an exercise requires vigilance as regards the extent to which generalisations can be based on the conclusions drawn from just a few cases. Chapter 4 addressed this issue in some detail. It considered that the approach to quality assurance in terms of policy domains and of fundamental choices, offered the possibility of expanding the analysis beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of the present study. The following paragraphs explore such a possibility.

The analysis of the data collected in the present study suggests that future developments in quality assurance policy in the four countries will show more of the already observed combination of difference and similarity. This observation stemmed from the responses currently provided by each country to the fundamental policy choices and was referred to as the oxymoron *convergent diversity*. The latter reflects well the present situation and can also be useful in portraying future developments. This point can be investigated further by combining two elements: recent events in HE policy at the national and international levels on the one hand; and the knowledge gained from the study of the construction of the national policy domains on the other.

At the supra-national level, trends towards greater harmonisation of national HE policies have accelerated in the last three years. First was the Sorbonne Declaration of May 1998, signed by only four European Ministers of Education, calling for a restructuring of national systems of HE that would enhance student mobility and employability and promote international recognition of national degrees (Declaration de la Sorbonne 1998). A year later, European Ministers of Education gathered again in Bologna to adopt what was to become a cornerstone in European HE policy (Bologna Declaration 1999). The actual impact of the latter document has yet to be seen, but there is no doubt that it constitutes a major force towards policy convergence. By expanding the Sorbonne objective as regards the comparability of national degrees, the Bologna Declaration directly impacts on the quality agenda. It does so because the comparability of national degrees is not only a question of curriculum architecture - the bachelor/master system - but is also a question of content and confidence. If the belief in the importance of students' mobility and employability becomes the norm among the signatory countries, there will be a need to develop a common agreement on the instruments that would ensure standards and qualifications within and across nations. Hence the emphasis put by the Bologna Declaration on greater transparency and the development of comparable criteria and methodologies in the domain of quality assurance.

The development of more homogeneous policies for quality assurance is also the objective of the *European Network for Quality Assurance* (ENQA). This body was set up after the adoption by the European Commission of the recommendation on co-operation in the domain of quality assurance (EC 1998) and is composed of representatives of national agencies. Where the Bologna Declaration and ENQA's activities come together is in the emphasis, implicit as regards the former, more explicit in the case of the latter, they both put on accreditation as an alternative to other types of quality assurance mechanisms. In terms of the approach developed in this study, this alternative can be understood as a new form of the response provided to the fundamental choice *procedures* (see 3.3.3). What is interesting for our purpose is the actual impact of this trend on individual countries.

Although it is still too early to determine definite future orientations, recent developments confirm the increasing importance gained by accreditation in the European context (Boffo 2001; CRE 2000; Damme 2000; ECIU 2001; Froment 2001; Haakstad 2001; Westerheijden

2001). In particular, this can be observed in three of the four countries discussed in this study and highlights the impact of the centripetal forces. However, a look at how they are actually dealing with it also reinforces the argument that these centripetal forces are dependent on national peculiarities, acting as centrifugal forces, when it comes to their implementation. Let us illustrate this point further.

In Switzerland, the issue of accreditation arose during the revision of the LAU between 1997 and 1998. Eventually, the body established to deal with quality assurance, the OAAQ, was also made responsible for carrying out future accreditation of study programmes or the institutions of HE. These new procedures should complement, rather than replace, any others that individual institutions may develop. In addition, there is no obligation for the institutions to be accredited, as there is no intention of linking the participation in, or the result of, the accreditation process with funding. Moreover, the OAAQ will only carry out the practical work and, eventually, it will be up to the CUS, a body with strong representation from the HE institutions and the cantons, to officially grant the accreditation. As shown in chapter 8, this way of introducing accreditation in HE stems from the refusal of the cantons and the universities to simply bow to the demands of the Confederation as regards quality assurance policy. This veto power results from the political organisation of the territory, which grants the sub-national levels substantial room for manoeuvre for the development of their own orientations in various policy domains, among which is HE. From this perspective, the political structure of the country requires negotiated solutions to be reached and prevents any unilateral decision from being imposed. In Switzerland, promoting voluntary accreditation by a joint federal/cantonal agency is the response to the need for transparency towards the outside and the requirement of negotiated outcomes on the inside.

The shift towards accreditation mechanisms is also observable in the Netherlands. Here, the government decided in December 2000 that accreditation would be promoted and would replace current procedures for quality assurance by 2003 (1.IV.e.2; 1.IV.i.11). In this context, the organisational features of the HE system seem to have strongly impacted on the proposed structure of accreditation. A national accreditation body will be established within which two sub-chambers will co-exist, one for each side of the binary divide (1.IV.e.3; 1.IV.e.5; Westerheijden 2001: 73). In addition, it will be possible for foreign agencies to accredit the programmes of Dutch universities and/or HBO-sector institutions, although this would not prevent the institutions from gaining accreditation from the national body. The methodology

and the definite organisational features are being worked out at the present moment. There are indications that the binary divide in accreditation would disappear after two years, and institutions from either side would be allowed to apply for accreditation to any of the sub-chambers, by then probably merged into a single one. The developments in the Dutch context further highlight the relevance of the national variable when addressing supra-national trends. In this case, it is the organisational features of the HE system that are most apparent, thus creating a situation if not of conflict, surely of uncertainty about the future.

The Spanish situation also points to the emergence of accreditation at the forefront of the debates. Interestingly, it coincides with the end of the first cycle covered by the PNECU and the launch of the second cycle in April 2001. Among the newly stated objectives is the establishment of a system of accreditation for programmes and institutions that would "ensure quality according to international standards" (BoE 2001: § 1). In addition, the draft of a new University Law published early May 2001 also makes provision for the creation of a national agency responsible for quality assurance and accreditation (MECyD 200:1 § 140-141). A look at the outline of the second PNECU indicates that accreditation procedures will, here too, complement those outlined in chapter 7. Moreover, the fact that accreditation is presented as one among other objectives of the PNECU recalls the difficult balance that needs to be found, as in Switzerland, between the new procedures that will be introduced and their potential outcomes. As noted earlier, CCAAs allocate the funds to their universities supposing a link between the result of the accreditation and budget allocation might be difficult, if not impossible, to implement.

In contrast to the other three countries, England does not seem to have been much affected by the aftermath of Bologna. Although the then Minister of HE, Tessa Blackstone, was one of the four European Ministers to sign the Sorbonne Declaration in 1998, there are few signs that the trends promoted there and fostered in the Bologna document have influenced recent debates on HE policy. In some regards, this is understandable inasmuch as the Bachelor/Master system promoted by the Bologna Declaration is already in place and,

indeed, was the model the document chose to follow[123]. In other regards, however, the current situation seems to present both a window of opportunity and to pose some serious challenges. The challenge would certainly come from the fact that, in contrast to their European counterparts, English universities have the privilege of granting their own degrees. Although it would not constitute a totally new experience for a large number of them[124], it seems somewhat unrealistic to imagine that any form of external validation would find much support in this country. The situation currently experienced in England, does, however offer at least some room for discussion. In effect, recent debates have highlighted the increasing discontent with how QAA is performing its task and the need to rethink the entire policy for quality assurance (HEFCE, UUK & QAA 2001; *The Guardian* 30.01.2001; *THES* 23.03.2001, 30.03.2001). This would be the perfect moment to address the Bologna agenda in general and the issue of accreditation in particular, although it remains to be seen if and how this mechanism would fit in a system where so much emphasis is put on quantifiable outcomes and accountability. In this regard, the study of the English case indicates that if anything close to programme or institutional accreditation has to be developed in this country, it will certainly be alongside other instruments that would meet governmental concerns for accountability.

This section has attempted to outline potential orientations for the future developments of quality assurance policy in England, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland. It has pointed out the current struggle between supra-national forces, pushing for (further) cross-national convergence, and infra-national peculiarities recalling the persistent influence of the national variable when it comes to translate into policy the ideals of harmonisation. In this regard, what is most striking is the existence of a common intention in three of the countries analysed here to follow the lines traced by the Bologna Declaration. Accreditation procedures are indeed high on these countries' agendas and, apparently, are there to remain. Nonetheless, as the present overview illustrates, one is still far from uniformity. National factors of the type addressed throughout the study are still prevalent and will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. In effect, despite the strength of Bologna, different academic

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123 However, it must be mentioned that the system promoted by the Bologna Declaration is based on 3 years undergraduate plus 2 years Masters degree or four years undergraduate and one year Masters degree. The current the system is based on three years undergraduate and one year Masters, which could cause some problems for Euro-compatibility.

124 All pre-1992 universities experienced the process of accreditation under the "late" CNAA.

histories and academic cultures can make the efforts for harmonisation difficult to fully implement.

9.6. Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has brought together the findings of the four country reports. The objective was, first, to address the different aspects of the research problem and, second, to identify future potential orientations of quality assurance policy in the four countries. It has done so by bringing back into the analysis the theoretical elements presented in the first part of the study and confronting them with the information gathered in each case.

In general, the discussion has highlighted a series of mixed feelings. By comparing the *ex ante* and *ex post* situations in each country, section 9.3 confirmed that cross-national policy convergence in quality assurance had admittedly taken place. However, this trend was far from homogeneous throughout the different components of the policy. Hence the oxymoron *convergent diversities* was adopted as a pertinent illustration of the current situation and – possibly – future orientations in quality assurance policy in the four countries.

On the one hand, it appeared that a belief had emerged in the four countries about the importance of quality assurance as an issue requiring the intervention of the political authorities. Eventually, this would lead to the construction of a systematised domain of quality assurance policy governed by particular beliefs translated into practice through different sets of instruments. This took place in the four countries analysed in this study, although differences prevailed as regards both the moment of the emergence of this belief and the context within which it emerged. On the other hand, the overall convergence was somewhat attenuated by the comparative analysis of the forms the national quality assurance policy domain had adopted. These forms, as of December 2000, were sketched out in Figure 9.1. The latter highlighted the types of responses the different countries were providing, at that precise moment, to the fundamental policy choices in quality assurance and revealed the presence of both differences and similarities.

Elements for an understanding of these differences and similarities are to be found in the particular configuration of the factors identified as potentially influential in the domain of quality assurance. The comparative analysis of these different factors shows that although all

of them have been observed at least once during the case studies, only a few are common to every country, either as regards the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue or the construction of the policy domain. This indicates that each country has worked out a unique configuration of the different factors affecting the form adopted by the policy domain and that each factor is not equally relevant in each country.

The fact that the factors configure in particular ways depending on the national context is in itself illuminative. It allows for a reconsideration of the conflict between the "local" and the "global". In the present study, this conflict manifests itself in the increasing calls for policy harmonisation of national HE systems HE and, as part of this movement, the policies for quality assurance. This study has shown, however, that harmonisation is not necessarily taking place in all aspects of quality assurance policy but that the structuring of a policy domain is largely influenced by national factors that cannot be underestimated.

Chapter 10 Summary and Conclusions

10.1. Introduction

Chapter 10 concludes this study by summarising the principal findings and conclusions. In section 10.2, the theoretical framework of the study is summarised. Then, section 10.3 turns to a brief discussion of the empirical findings. Finally, section 10.4 reflects on the pertinence of the overall research design by presenting ways of potential improvements. This section includes some suggestions for future research on the basis of both the theoretical construct and the empirical findings.

The research problem of this study concentrated on cross-national policy convergence in the domain of quality assurance in HE. Do countries of a common geographical area provide similar responses when confronted with similar issues? Do they, rather, formulate their own, particular responses to these issues? If the responses are similar, why is that? If they differ, what are the factors that can provide an understanding of the differences?

These were legitimate concerns in a period of increasing claims for harmonisation of national HE policies. They questioned the orientations of national systems of HE in the 21st century and forced to think about instruments that may provide an appropriate balance between calls for greater homogeneity and persistent national idiosyncrasies.

The research problem attempted to circumscribe these concerns. It was further elaborated upon in number of research questions. Some of them addressed theoretical matters and were dealt with in chapters 3 and 4. Others concentrated more specifically on the empirical investigations and the subsequent comparative discussion. The 8 research questions that have structured the entire study were related to the following elements:

- *Policy and policy convergence*. What is a policy? What does it consist of? What is policy convergence? How can these notions be best addressed for the purpose of the study?
- *Quality assurance in HE*. How can the notions of policy and quality assurance be related? What are the factors that lead to the emergence of quality assurance policies? What are the factors that participate in the construction of quality assurance policies? What is quality assurance policy in a number of cases?

- *Cross-national policy convergence in the domain of quality assurance in HE.* Is there cross-national policy convergence in quality assurance in HE? If so, what is the extent of this observed convergence? What does the knowledge of particular cases tell about future developments?

Having presented the general lines along which the study has progressed, the chapter now turns to a brief summary of the theoretical elements as were developed in chapters 2 and 3.

10.2. The Theory

The theoretical framework of the study was presented in chapter 2 and redefined in chapter 3 alongside a model to analyse comparatively quality assurance in HE. The latter was approached as a policy domain or, more precisely, as part of the broader policy domain known as HE. Such an approach located the study within the body of literature on policy analysis.

In this perspective, chapter 2 discussed the notion of public policy at some length to specify what it means and to discern what it consists of. As a result, it was argued that a public policy, understood as the activities undertaken under governmental action, encompassed two interconnected dimensions. The first one, referred to as the *ideational dimension*, related to the normative elements underlying governmental action. The second one, the *material dimension*, consisted of the instruments formulated to translate the normative beliefs into public action. This way of proceeding allowed for a combination of well-known traditions in public policy analysis, in terms of institutions or interests, with less, although not totally new, well-known ones touching upon the role of ideas in policy making.

In order to provide a dynamic approach to the process of change in quality assurance policy, the notion of policy paradigms was then devised and discussed in relation to the study of policy domains. In this perspective, it seemed important to indicate that there is no such thing as one single quality assurance policy. Rather this is a question that evolves over time according to changes in society as a whole. Based on these elements, the discussion progressed towards the relation between policy domains, policy paradigms and public policies. It was argued that the paradigm dominating a policy domain was always time and space dependent. In this sense, the structure of a policy domain reflected the actualisation of a number of fundamental policy choices, i.e. choices all national domains had to address in

one way or another. The actualisation of these fundamental policy choices is done through the formulation of a particular public policy governed by a time- and space-dependent paradigm encompassing the normative and material dimensions of all public policies.
Chapter 2 also paid attention to the notion of policy convergence and how it could be best used for the purposes of the study. It was first argued that cross-national policy convergence could not be assumed beforehand but had to be established after an empirical investigation. This led to the recognition that convergence could only be one among other potential outcomes. In order to account for this possibility a distinction was sketched out between *convergence*, *divergence*, *persistent difference* and *persistent similarity*.

In chapter 3, the general theoretical framework was refined to account for the specificities of the quality assurance policy domain. First, the fundamental policy choices in this particular policy domain were outlined in terms of responses to five elements: the *objectives* of quality assurance policies; the *control of* the policy domain; the *areas* in which quality assurance has to operate, the *procedures* to be developed and the *use* of the information collected. In order to understand differences and/or similarities, a number of factors were identified for two different stages: the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue, on the one hand, and the construction of the national policy domain on the other.

Potential cross-national policy convergence would thus be analysed in terms of responses to the fundamental choices. A brief summary of the empirical findings is provided in the following section.

10.3. The Empirical Analyses

In order to assess whether national policies for quality assurance were converging and the extent to which they were doing so, a case-study research design was developed and a comparative framework was devised. The latter was based on the distinction between synchrony and diachrony as two distinct stages of the same approach. This comparative framework was applied to the study of quality assurance in four European countries (England, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland) whose selection combined personal interest and intellectual curiosity.

Each country was analysed separately in the chapters 5 to 8. These chapters were organised on an identical basis. They all started with a description of the most significant institutional features as the broad political and societal spectrum within which HE policy is made. The national systems of HE were then presented followed by the (collective) actors involved in HE policy making. Afterwards, the chapters turned to the analysis of quality assurance policy on the basis of the synchronic/diachronic distinction. This was done by, first, outlining the current situation in terms of responses to fundamental policy choices and, then, by providing a narrative of the routes taken by each country to reach the current situation. This narrative was founded upon an analysis of official and academic documentation as well as newspaper reports and was complemented by interviews conducted with key actors within the four countries. Each chapter concluded with a summary of the principal findings and some provisional conclusions were drawn.

After this separate discussion of each national experience, a comprehensive analysis of the four cases was provided in chapter 9. This made it possible, first, to assess whether cross-national policy convergence had taken place and, if so, to what extent; and, second, to identify what had been the factors that had most influenced national trajectories both in the emergence of quality assurance as a problem and the construction of the national policy domain. The combination of these two stages, it was expected, would shed some light on the relationship between pressures for policy harmonisation and impact of national peculiarities. To that end, the four cases were replaced within the theoretical framework and the different factors were assessed alternatively. First, a statement about the cross-national policy convergence was provided followed by an assessment of the extent to which it had actually been the case. This made it possible to argue that the four countries had effectively become more similar as regards the policies formulated to address quality assurance in their respective systems of HE. This conclusion stemmed from the comparison of the current situation in the four countries with what was observable when quality assurance first emerged on their political agendas and the recognition of the importance of developing policies for quality assurance in HE. However, the assessment of the extent of the convergence led to a less straightforward result. Although the four countries had become more similar, substantial differences remained as regards the beliefs on the objectives of the policies and, consequently, in (some of) the policy instruments constructed to translate these beliefs into practice. The study therefore concluded that general cross-national convergence

had taken place, thus highlighting the influence of supra-national factors as regards the establishment of the national policy agenda. However, the differences that did not fail to appear from one country to the other, made it possible to counterbalance the inter-national pressures with intra-national characteristics. In this regard, the comparative analysis of the factors at play in the construction of the national policy domain of quality assurance.

Chapter 9 expressed the mixed feelings that emerged from the comparative study of the four countries. On the one hand, cross-national policy convergence had been established *ex post*, rather than assumed *ex ante*. On the other hand, the establishment of this convergence was found relevant only in general terms, whereas more detailed examination of national trajectories highlighted elements of persisting differences. In addition, the comparative analysis of both the emergence of the quality debate and the construction of the quality assurance policy domain came up against the difficulty, indeed, impossibility, to identify factors common to all the countries, which would have helped in understanding the differences and/or similarities. Rather, the study suggested that the factors had configured differently in different national contexts. This indicated that the national variable remains a central element when it comes to the translation of supra-national claims for greater policy homogenisation.

10.4. Desirable Extensions of the Study

This study has attempted to shed some light on the way(s) different countries have been dealing with a similar issue, quality assurance in HE. It has shown that cross-national policy convergence has taken place in general terms but that substantial differences still remain in the way(s) countries address the fundamental policy choices. While carrying out the analysis, and especially after having compared the actual results, two agendas for research have emerged. The first derives from the deficiencies in the theoretical framework and the research design that should be rectified in future research addressing cross-national policy convergence. The second agenda relates to research that could be undertaken to address questions not directly dealt with here or that have arisen during the investigation.

10.4.1. Rectifying Deficiencies

The theoretical framework put much emphasis on the conceptualisation of public policy and the relationship between the components of a public policy and its actualisation. By so doing, less attention has been paid to influence of actors, although one of the factors taken into consideration dealt with the role of collective bodies involved HE policy making. A way to improve the current theoretical framework would be to combine it with works emphasising the moment of change and the actors intervening at that particular moment to promote particular ideas and personal interests. This could be done by resorting to the work of John Kingdon (1984). The American political scientist re-visits Cohen *et al.*'s garbage can model of decision-making (1972) to understand the processes of agenda setting and alternative generation. To that end, he develops the concepts of policy streams, policy windows and policy entrepreneurs as conceptual devises to understand how change comes about in a policy domain. Combining the ideational approach in terms of policy paradigms, as developed in this study, with the conceptual apparatus provided by Kingdon, would allow for a better understanding of *how* and (maybe) *why* some ideas become more powerful than others at a given moment of time and what are the actors that manage to take advantage of that moment to bring forward particular alternatives. However, it has to be pointed out that such a way of improving the theoretical background would not go without costs. For a single researcher, it would be indispensable to reduce scope of the investigation to a more manageable number of countries, so that a more detailed narrative can be provided[125].

The theoretical framework could be improved in another way, namely through a better specification of the notion of policy beliefs. This study made it clear that policy beliefs referred to general worldviews and opinions as the way a particular policy domain should be organised and pointed out preferences in the responses to the fundamental choices. This way of approaching the concept was not sufficiently explicit, especially when it came to the responses to the *objectives* of quality assurance policy. Here, the theoretical framework would benefit from a distinction between the overall policy beliefs of the ruling government (in terms of policy styles, ideational positions, etc) and the specific policy beliefs governing the organisation of policy domains. Although necessarily related, the two refer to different

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[125] Kingdon limited his research to the study of two policy domains (health and transportation) in the United States. It was a four-year long process involving almost 250 lengthy and detailed interviews with people close to decision-making in these two domains.

analytical levels: the general policy orientation on the one hand, the more specific objectives to be achieved in a policy domain, on the other.

Alongside theoretical lines, the study could also be improved as regards the research design adopted. The comparative framework proved helpful in de-naturalising the current structure of the national quality assurance policy domains and in showing how this structure reflects a specific configuration of factors. This was made possible through a detailed analysis of documentary sources of different types as the prime material upon which the research was founded. The analysis of this literature made it possible to identify policy reports and other types of documentary sources that appeared to be crucial for each case. As far as possible, these sources of information were complemented and checked against knowledge from data collected through interviews with key (national) actors. The latter point has been somewhat frustrating and should be improved in future research in order to find a better balance between the documentary analysis *stictu sensu* and interviews. In fact, the interviews have not equally able to identify for each country oral information on the emergence of the quality debate, thus making this part of the study too dependent on written documentation and, as far as the Dutch case is concerned, secondary sources of written documentation. Future research should promote a more consistent and larger use of interviews especially in those countries were the quality debate came to the forefront in the late 1970s and early 1980s, i.e. England and the Netherlands as far as this study is concerned. Expanding the number of interviewees could also be a mean to improve the understanding of how a country came up with particular responses as regards quality assurance, thus meeting the requirements of a theoretical framework in terms of policy paradigms, policy streams and policy entrepreneurs.

10.4.2. Future Research

There are three areas in which it could be useful to extend the present study: a) increasing the *number of countries* included in the sample, b) further emphasising the *international dimension* and c) turning the focus more directly *towards the future*. The following paragraphs consider each of these potential areas of future research in turn.

This study concentrated on the analysis of four European countries, which for a single researcher working within a limited period of time was the most that could be done. It has made clear that national political institutions and, more generally, the political organisation

of the territory, as defined in chapter 3, do matter when it comes to the translation of general policy beliefs into policy instruments. For instance, the Swiss case demonstrates how bottom-heavy federalism forces the Confederation to negotiate a way through the construction of the policy domain with its political partners and prevents the adoption of radical (and unilateral) decisions. Similarly, the culture of accommodation in Dutch politics appears to have played a central role in the way the construction of the policy domain has been made, especially as regards the substantial prerogatives retained by the sector of HE. Extending the study to other countries, politically centralised or decentralised, could permit a diversification of the types of political institutional features taken into consideration in order to investigate further the relevance of the national variable in the formulation of public policies. It would also increase the number of HE systems in order to assess whether there is a pattern in the type of responses according to the model the national systems originate from.

A second area in which this study could be expanded is in the attention paid to the *international dimension*. For reasons that were exposed in the Introduction, it was not possible to concentrate at the same time on the national and the inter-national dimensions in the analysis of policy change in quality assurance. This choice has proved correct as far as the English and Dutch cases are concerned, inasmuch as these two countries appear to have been less influenced by external pressures. At the most, they have been seen as models or examples but the international dimension did not play a crucial role in the construction of their policy domains. This was not the case for Spain and, to a lesser extent, Switzerland. These latter countries appear to have been more influenced by external features, which can be explained by their later taking into consideration of the quality issue, especially in Switzerland. In addition, the importance of recent developments such as signing of the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations indicate that HE has definitely entered the global age. Increasing claims for policy harmonisation as those expressed during the Salamanca (in March 2001) and Prague (in May 2001) conferences show that the relationship between the "global" and the "local" in HE policy making needs further and better understanding. In effect, as this study has shown, national environments remain key features when it comes to translate general orientations into feasible policies. In this regard, the international arena of HE could be addressed through the study of collective bodies and agencies working in the domain of quality assurance at the supra-national level, among which, in the geographical context of this study, the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) is of particular

importance. What makes the ENQA an extremely interesting body to look at is the fact that it is composed of actors occupying a key position at the national level as well. Further research into the global/local problematic should take into account the role of the ENQA as an idea-producer body and how national actors therein are related to policy innovation in their own countries. An analysis in terms of policy networks could here be most profitable and would be in line with potential improvements to the theoretical framework.

Finally, a third area, somewhat different from the previous ones, through which the present study could be expanded, would be to turn the focus on *future developments in the domain of quality assurance*. The purpose of the present study meant that the focus of the empirical investigations had to be the past. Policy convergence, as noted several times, could not be assumed *ex ante*, but had to be observed *ex post*. Hence the emphasis on the reconstruction of the national policy domain. The kind of analysis developed to that end did not pay much tribute to the future of quality assurance. An attempt to remedy to this absence was provided in section 9.4 where some potential orientations were outlined, based on both recent developments in HE policy at the national and international levels and the knowledge acquired from the past. In this regard, it seems important to investigate the impact of the Bologna Declaration on the national systems of quality assurance in a more extended manner than the few lines offered earlier. There are signs that the countries analysed here have taken the 2010 deadline seriously and are working towards the harmonisation of their HE systems, at least in terms of curriculum architecture. Will the future of quality assurance in HE be characterised by further cross-national convergence, as the focus on accreditation mechanisms as the dominant policy instrument seems to indicate? Or rather, would the local variable retain a crucial role in the re-formulation of global policies? These are questions that would certainly be worth some thought. In another study.

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[References to interviews are anonymised in the main text and identified by various numbers and letters. See Appendix 2 for details of coding and interviewees' profiles]

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Appendix 1 Methodological Implications of the Fundamental Choices in the Domain of Quality Assurance Policy

In chapter 3, the issue of quality assurance was approached in terms of pairs of oppositions constructed from each of the five principal issues addressed. These oppositions are always presented in the either/or form and encompass, depending on the issue, one or more different dimensions. For instance, to address the issue of *Who is responsible for quality assurance?* (see Figure 3.2 above) a first opposition is established between the political authorities on the one hand and the sector of HE on the other. This first opposition is then developed further so as to highlight other potential ones within it. This leads to the construction of two other pairs of oppositions, one for each dimension of the previous ones. Each opposition encompasses two dimensions that are presented as mutually exclusive, although in reality they may not necessarily be so.

The construction of such radical oppositions is heuristically useful although potentially misleading. It is heuristically useful because it offers a clear and straightforward construct through which the central elements of the issues addressed can be observed, analysed and reported. The opposition between the political authorities and the HE sector as regards the ownership of the procedures of quality assurance clearly delimits the nature of the actors involved in the process. From this point of view, quality assurance procedures can either be the responsibility of the political authorities or of the sector and no other (collective) actor interferes within these two. Although heuristically useful, the construction of such types of opposition can also be misleading. It can be so if the researcher, or the reader, sees them as finite entities or/and as established realities. Approached in this way, the opposition is reified and loses its usefulness. What was devised as a means to delimit the area of investigation, becomes a rigid corset that prevents a clear appreciation of the actual situation. For instance, ownership of the procedures is rarely the prerogative of a unique actor but corresponds to mixed arrangements or negotiated consensus between the two actors referred to above. It is precisely because the opposition political authorities vs. HE sector, as well as the oppositions derived from it, cannot account for existing realities that it can be misleading.

The different sets of oppositions proposed to address quality assurance in higher education consequently gain from being understood as some sort of *ideal types* of potential relationships and outcomes. The notion is borrowed from Max Weber (1949: 90), for whom they constitute one of the best tools in historical comparative studies. An ideal type can be

understood as an analytical device that helps social researchers to determine the extent to which concrete social institutions are similar and how they differ from some defined measure (Aron 1970: 197-204).

The set of oppositions developed above departs, however, from pure examples of ideal types in some regards. In effect, according to Weber, the construction of an ideal type involves pointing out the *logically consistent* features of a social institution or other social phenomena. This does not fully correspond to our own approach to the characteristics of quality assurance procedures. As noted earlier, the approach defended here is not concerned with determining the intrinsic characteristics of quality assurance but rather to capture a number of essential features in each of the issues addressed.

Despite this difference, the approach in terms of pairs of oppositions is similar to Weberian ideal types as regards the process of construction of the pairs of oppositions. Ideal types can be understood as abstractions inductively derived from sensible knowledge. As such, they never correspond to concrete reality but are a landmark to which reality can be contrasted. Weber's approach permits us to point out how much particular institution in a particular place differs from the ideal type, thus offering a valuable tool for cross-national comparisons. The approach in terms of oppositions, although it does not focus on the intrinsic characteristics of quality, is also the result of an inductive abstraction from the day-to-day practice of quality assurance. It derives the dimensions from the observed reality and displays them abstractly enough to encompass as many different actualisations as possible. Similarly to the ideal types, it becomes possible to compare the position of the different national settings not in contrast to the ideal type itself but within the boundaries delimited by the pairs of oppositions. It is therefore also possible to locate the different national settings not in contrast to the ideal type but within the boundaries delimited by the pairs of oppositions.

Translated into the domain of quality assurance, this involves determining what, in each of the question addressed, can be the elements that are intrinsically present and that cannot be avoided in each case. Similarly to what has been said regarding the factors at play in the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue, and in the shape taken by the policy domain, the different elements will not necessarily be present in all empirical observations.

Appendix 2 The Coding System and Informants' Profiles

This appendix to the methodological chapter provides the key to the system adopted for coding the information collected during the interview sessions. It tries to find an appropriate balance between a reader's need of knowing the origin of the informant and the latter's right and demand for confidentiality. A list of the interviewees remains with the supervisor of the present study who has also been provided with a full transcription of the interviews.

The Coding System

All the interviewees were given a code number. This number informs about four main elements, which permit to draw a general profile of the informant.

First, all the interviewees were classified in three categories according to their role and position as regards quality assurance policy. A description of these categories is offered below. The category to which the informant was allocated was indicated by Latin numbers. Second, the country of origin of the informant was denoted by Roman numbers. Third, to this number, a letter was added to indicate a particular informant within that country. In each country, the informants were ranked in the chronological order of the interviews. In the event where the information was taken from a group interview, the letter *m* was added. Eventually, each piece of information taken from the interviews was numbered in Latin numbers according to the question the interviewee was answering. An example can help to better understand the coding system. If, for instance, the research makes reference to **3.II.c.4** as a source of information, the coding system permits to infer that:

3 : the informant was identified as belonging to category 3 (see below);
II : the informant came from country II;
c* : the informant was the third person to be interviewed in country II;
m* : (if applicable) would indicate that the information was gathered during a group interview;
4 : the information referred to the answer given to question number four.
* : (if applicable) place after these codes, would indicate that the interviewee(s) did not wish to be recorded on tape.

It is important to note that although a general guide was prepared that addressed general issues for each interviewee, all the interviews did not follow identical patterns. This is consistent with the objective of the interviews to serve both as a means to collect information from people directly involved in quality assurance policy and as a means for triangulation.

Therefore, each interview evolved differently, as regards the questions asked, although a number of similar questions were asked to each interviewee.

The information collected during the interviews was categorised under generic headings. These were constructed in order to address the different factors identified as potentially at play in the emergence of the debates on quality assurance and in the construction of the policy domain. The information was then placed under each heading according to the question that was being addressed. Headings included the following topics: interviewee's profile; main activities of the organisation in which the interviewee was working; relationships among national HE actors; influence of political institutions in the policy outcome; emergence of quality assurance as an issue; role of international context; massification; governance structures of national HE system.

Categorisation of the Informants

Because the moment of the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue differs from one country to another, as does the timing of the answers provided to it, informants did not necessarily hold a position within the policy domain when they were interviewed. Nevertheless, in the period for which information was requested, broadly speaking mid-1980s until mid-, late 1990s according to the country, they all belonged to one of the agencies identified in each case study as key institutional actors in the domain of HE policy.

In order to provide an indication of the informants' profiles, while retaining as large a degree of confidentiality as possible, one can identify three broad categories within which the interviewees can be placed. The first category encompasses members of national agencies for quality assurance or bodies related to the implementation of quality assurance at the institutional level. Typical examples could be a member of the English QAA, the Dutch VSNU, etc. The second category deals with members of agencies involved in the domain of HE policy in general although not exclusively related to quality assurance. In this case, the informants would include members of the CVCP/U-UK or the Swiss CRUS. Finally, the third category encompasses informants from governmental departments or agencies working on behalf of national governments. Here, the informants could be part of the HEFC, the Dutch HE Inspectorate or of any national administration.

FIGURE APPENDIX 2: SUMMARY OF THE INFORMANTS' PROFILES

	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3
Country V	▪ (1.V.a) ▪ (1.V.c) ▪ (1.V.f)	▪ (2.V.e) ▪ (2.V.b)	▪ (3.V.d)
Country IV	▪ (1.IV.e) ▪ (1.IV.i)	▪ (2.IV.a) ▪ (2.IV.b) ▪ (2.IV.c) ▪ (2.IV.d) ▪ (3.IV.f)	▪ (3.IV.g) ▪ (3.IV.hm)
Country III	▪ (1.III.a) ▪ (1.III.b) ▪ (1.III.c) ▪ (1.III.dm)		
Country II		▪ (2.II.b) ▪ (2.II.a) ▪ (2.II.d)	▪ (3.II.c)

Informants' Profiles

The profiles of the interviewees differ, although they all share the common characteristic to be or to have been involved, in different moments and levels, in the formulation of HE policy and, for the great majority of them, quality assurance policy in their respective countries. The first question of each interview asked the informant to present her/himself and to indicate how they came to hold the position they had at the moment for which information was requested. On the basis of this information, it is possible to construct an overall profile. The latter is presented below. Again, in order to avoid identification, the profiles have been kept as vague as possible.

Informants' Profiles: An Overview

II.a — A member of one of the national bodies responsible for HE policy, II.a was well placed to observe and comment on the construction of HE policy in country II. In addition, as part of her/his daily work, this informant also had constant and privileged access to holders of senior positions within the national administration.

II.b — In the period for which information was requested, this informant held a senior position in one of the agencies responsible for HE policy in country II. II.b was very active in the discussions that have surrounded the passing of the 1999 LAU. The information obtained provided an insight into the types of relationships held among the different actors involved in HE policy making in country II.

II.c	This informant occupied a senior position within the national administration in country II. As such, s/he was deeply involved in all issues related to university policy and has been deeply involved in the formulation of recent legislation.
II.d	This informant held a senior position in one of the HE institutions' representative bodies of country II. As such, s/he provided valuable information from an institutional view-point as regards HE policy in general and the domain of quality assurance in particular.
III.a	III.a was involved in the formulation of quality assurance policy of country III from the very beginnings. A member of one of the national bodies responsible for HE policy in general and quality assurance in particular, this informant has provided valuable knowledge of how quality assurance emerged in country III and how it evolved over the years.
III.b	An academic, this informant was also involved in the early stages of the formulation of quality assurance policy in country III. Since, s/he has become a member of the one of the committees in charge of the implementation of quality assurance. This informant is actively involved in the overall debates about HE policy in general in country III and abroad. S/he is also involved in various international networks.
III.c	A member of a university administration, this informant held a position in one of the committees responsible for implementing the instruments of quality assurance policy at the institutional level. III.c was well aware of the type of instruments currently used and of the problems they may cause within a HE institution. According to the interviews' wish, this interview session was not recorded. Notes were taken by the present author.
III.d/m	III.d/m refers to an interview session held with various informants. These were all members of one of the bodies responsible for quality assurance policy in country III. These informants provided valuable information on the current structure of the quality assurance policy domain in that country and on future developments. According to the interviewees' wish, this interview session was not recorded. Notes were taken by the author.
IV.a	This informant held a senior position in one of the HE institution's umbrella organisations of country IV. As such, IV.a was able to observe and participate in recent debates about HE policy in general in her/his country. This information has been very useful to reconstruct the overall context within which quality assurance policy has evolved in recent years in country IV.

IV.b	At the moment for which information was sought, this informant was a policy advisor for one the institutions' umbrella organisations of country IV. Among this informant's activities are the constant liaison with political actors and lobbying in favour of her/his organisation. This makes IV.b a very valuable source of information.
IV.c	IV.c worked part-time as an advisor to the board of directors of a HE institution. As part of her/his work, this informant was in constant liaison with senior members in the Ministry of Education as regards the overall orientations of the HE policy.
IV.d	This informant was also a policy advisor for one the HE umbrella organisations. S/he was involved in all the debates related to the overall organisation of HE policy, especially as regards the structure of the sector and funding issues.
IV.e	This informant occupied a key position in the formulation of current orientations in the domain of quality assurance policy. A member of one of the HE institutions' umbrella organisation of country IV, s/he was also involved in the debates regarding the structure of the sector as a whole and the future of quality assurance at the national and international level.
IV.f	At the moment of the interview, this informant was working for one of the organisations representing HE institutions in country IV. There, her/his task consisted principally in the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data about HE institutions. The information obtained from this informant was very helpful for all what refers to recent statistical information.
IV.g	At the moment for which information was requested, this interviewee had direct and continuous access to the Minister of Education of Country IV. This informant offered valuable insight into the situation within the national administration at the moment when HE was in turmoil in country IV and quality assurance was emerging as a important political issue.
IV.h/m	IV.h/m refers to an interview held with two informants. At the moment of the interview, the latter were holding senior positions in one of the agencies responsible for quality assurance in country IV. Before joining this agency, the informants were holding either a professorial position in a University or a senior position in one of the governmental departments.
IV.i	This informant occupied a privileged position within one of the agencies responsible for quality assurance policy in country IV. IV.i participated in the debates around quality assurance and was part of the reduced network of actors that formulated the policy at its early stages. S/he is still very active at national and international levels.

V.a At the moment for which information was requested, this informant was a member of one of the national bodies responsible for the formulation and implementation of quality assurance policies in country V. S/he still is actively involved in the domain of quality assurance policy both at the national and international levels.

V.b During the late 1980s, V.b was involved in one of the HE institutions' umbrella organisations of country V. This informant held a crucial position in the development of the instruments for quality assurance. V.b also offers valuable information from inside the HE sector of country V.

V.c This informant was holding a senior position in one of the national agencies responsible for quality assurance policy during the first half of the 1990s. This position, combined with the previous one s/he had occupied, made this informant well aware of the general atmosphere in HE at the turn of the 1980s.

V.d In the early and mid-1990s, this informant was holding a senior position in one of the governmental agencies of country V. The information provided by V.d permitted to better determine what type of relationships existed between the informant's agency and the political authorities as well as HE institutions of country V.

V.e Similarly to V.b, V.e was involved in one the HE institutions' umbrella organisations of country V. In the early, mid-1990 s/he held a senior position, thus making this informant a very valuable source of information for the general context that surrounded the construction of quality assurance policy in country V.

V.f Holding a senior position in one of the HE institutions' umbrella organisations in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this informant moved to one of the agencies responsible for quality assurance policy in country V. From there, s/he was able to participate actively in the debates about the shape of the policy domain.